

The Conspirators

J. P. Sousa

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Arriving opposite the Franklin house, Tom Foley took position in a near-by alley, where he could keep close watch on the front gate. After hours of nervous waiting, little Lillian Franklin came out, and Tom's heart gave a jump. She was alone, and began to roll a hoop, which her friend Sandy had given her that morning. Down the street she tripped, all smiles and happiness.

Tom watched her until she had turned a corner, then he rushed up the alley to intercept her. When he emerged into the street, he saw her resting on a rustic bench, and hastened to join her. As he came up, he was greeted with:

“Why, Tom, I thought you went fishing with Gil, and papa, and Sandy, and the rest.”

“No, Lily. I felt so bad 'bout my dad being arrested yest'day I couldn't git up no courage to go,” answered the boy with simulated contrition. What d'yer say? let's s'prise Gil, and go down to the landin' an' meet him when he comes in from fishin',” suggested Foley, knowing the intense love she had for her brother.

“That'll be lovely, won't it? And Gil will be so glad if I come.”

Lillian whipped the hoop rapidly, and Tom kept pace with her.

“Gil will be surprised, sure enough, when he sees me coming, won't he?”

“Yes, he'll be s'prised, you bet!” said the boy, taking a firmer hold of her hand.

The night was fast approaching and Foley was leading the child through unfrequented alleys and streets.

“But maybe Gil won't come back this way, and it's getting awful dark.”

“Oh, he'll come back this way, all right.”

They were now on the shore of the river, dark and desolate in its winter dress. The restless splash of the water sent icy sprays over the child, and, clinging still closer to her treacherous companion, she stopped him for a second and begged him to return.

“Don't be afear'd, nuthin's goin' ter happen to yer,” he said, jerking her savagely, and almost breaking into a run at the same time.

“Oh, Tom, please let's go back,” supplicated the child.

They were now at the old wharf. He gave a low whistle, and, without waiting for an answer, pulled the helpless child through the entrance. Then, groping his way over the slimy stones and through the oozing mud, he dragged the affrighted little one after him, to the mouth of the cave, and called:

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``Dad, I'm here."

``Come right in," answered a voice.

``I've got her, an' I got her easy as dirt," said the son, pushing the terrified child into the cave, and then roughly into the arms of his father.

``Don't yell, yer brat!" said the older, clasping his hand over mouth, and drawing her brutally toward him. ``Shut up, or I'll kill yer."

Foley now called Hildey, who was, asleep in the corner, and said, ``Cul, we've got to git out er this place jest as quick as possible. It's too near the city, an' if we're tracked here we'll stand no more chance than a snowball on Beelzebub's gridiron."

``What's yer lay, Dennis?" questioned Hildey.

``Move up the river," was the reply. ``I knows jest the place where we wouldn't be found in a thousand years."

``When d'yer want to start?" asked Tom.

In ten minutes the abductors, with the stolen child, were slowly winding their way along the deserted beach.

It was now very dark. No stars were shining, and it had become bitterly cold. Suddenly voices were heard, and the abductors stopped to listen. They were in a ravine near the magazine landing, not more than fifty feet from the spot where the Lillian was launched. Foley, Tom, and Hildey crouched low, and drew the little girl closer.

The steady dip of oars was heard up stream, and the voices grew plainer. Out of the mingled sounds was heard,

``I agrees with Sandy, he's the dirtiest coward as ever went unhung."

Lillian started, for she recognized the voice of the Jedge, who with Colonel Franklin, Sandy, Dink, Leander and Gilbert, were returning from a sail up the river

Foley became frightened, and bending over, hissed into the child's ear:

``Remember what I tol' yer: if yer utter a sound, I'll kill yer."

The sailing party meantime had reached the landing and stepped ashore. Sandy and the other three boys lowered the sail, rolled and carried it into the boat-house. The whole party then, marching three abreast, with steady step, went up the graveled walk of the old magazine road, singing in unison:

``Hep Hep
Shoot that ni**er if he don't keep step.
Hep Hep
Shoot that ni**er if he don't keep step.''

While its cadence was continued by Colonel Franklin and the Jedge, the four boys, in marching rhythm, sang out cheerily into the crisp cold night:

``When other lips and other hearts,
Their tales of love shall tell,
In accents whose excess imparts

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The power they feel so well.
There may, perhaps, in such a scene,
Some recollection be,
Of days that have as happy been,
And you'll remember me.''

The three scoundrels listened, as the voices rose and fell on the air. The child, with the fear of death before her, and in the clutches of her horrible captor, gave one convulsive sob and sank swooning at his feet.

Foley picked her up and, walking quickly, placed her in the very boat her father and friends had left but a moment before. He wrapped her in a ragged coat, loosened the hasp of the door on the boat-house, and took out the oars.

Quickly the captors pushed the craft into deep water, and with muffled stroke moved through the inky waves, a somber specter sneaking along the banks of the sleeping marches.

When they neared the upper bridge, Foley ran the boat ashore and abandoned it. Picking up the exhausted and benumbed child, he led his two companions along the causeway and over the road leading to the bridge.

The wind came out of the north, howling through the leafless boughs of the mighty monarchs of the forest. The last flickering light of the town was left far behind, and darkness, like a great shroud, enveloped river, valley and woods.

In due time Colonel Franklin and his party reached home, hungry after their fine sail on the river, and all in high spirits.

``Jedge, you and the boys sit right down, and we'll have supper in a jiffy."''

The guests thoroughly enjoyed the evening meal. The repast was about concluded when Edith, who had just returned from the parsonage, came in, and called cheerily:

``Hurry up, Lily, it's time to go to the festival. They're going to light up the tree at half-past eight, and it's nearly that now."''

``Why, chil', Lily ain't here. She's wif yo' folks," exclaimed Delia.

``With us? She hasn't been with us at all," responded Edith.

``It's likely she's at one of the neighbors," ventured the Colonel.

``I'll fin' her, Muster Franklin, an' I'se gwine to scol' her good an' hard fo' worryin' her ol' mammy. At this she put a shawl over her head and shoulderst and started in search of the absent one

``Suppose I go too," suggested Gilbert, rising.

``I don't think that's necessary," interposed the Colonel.

``It'll only take me a minute," assured the son, as he began to put on his overcoat.

``Go if you like then," consented the Colonel.

``An' if yer don't mind, Miss Deed," volunteered Sandy, ``I'll go up to church with yer, an' then come back an' fetch Lily and Gil."''

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“That’s a good idea,” answered Edith, “bring her right over to the church, and I’ll be waiting for you there.”

“I guess I’ll go up to my house an’ look. Mebbe Lily is playin’ with Zorah, an’ if she is, I’ll come right back an’ tell yer,” put in Dink.

Edith, Delia and the three boys departed, leaving the Colonel and the Jedge alone, smoking their pipes and discussing the sensational events of the week, in which Dennis Foley was the central figure.

The conversation was stopped by the appearance of Delia and Gilbert, who declared that not one of the neighbors had seen Lillian that afternoon.

“It seems almost incredible that she could be lost,” said the father, “she must be somewhere about here. Perhaps she went to the church, and fell asleep in one of the pews.”

The searching party set out once more, this time accompanied by the Colonel himself, and by the Jedge. At the church they heard from Sandy and Dink that no trace of the child had been found, so the father requested the minister to inquire of the congregation if the missing one had been seen anywhere. There was no response from those present, and the family and friends began to show grave concern.

Another effort at finding her was immediately made. The police sergeant was notified, and he sent out a general alarm.

All night long, and all the next day the hunt was continued. Wells were explored, basements, cellars and out-of-the-way places were ransacked, lumber yards and coal yards were gone through most carefully. In fact, not a foot of the town was left unsearched, but all to no avail, and the once happy home of the Franklins was steeped in sorrow and despair.

The morning after Lillian’s disappearance, Mrs. Foley inquired of the boys in the neighborhood if they had seen anything of her son Tom, who, she declared, had been gone since the previous morning.

From Sandy she learned that Tom had taken dinner at Gilbert’s the day before, but that when the party had started for the river he had dropped out, claiming he was too down-hearted to join in the pleasure.

“That’s the way he acted at home,” said the widow, “and it seemed to me it was almost unnacheral for him to talk against his father, as he did. However, I’m not bothered about him, for he comes and goes just as he pleases, and when he gets good and ready he’ll turn up, like a bad penny. I’ve stopped worryin’ about him years an’ years ago.”

“If I see Tom,” volunteered the boy, “I’ll tell him yer want him,” and he hurried away.

The next morning Sandy left home earlier than usual, and on his own account began a search for Lillian. A new theory had taken possession of him, and he started at once for the river. At the magazine gate he chatted with the sentry about the mysterious disappearance, and passed on. When he reached the shore half a mile beyond, he was surprised to find that the padlock on the door of the shed had been pried off, and that his boat was missing.

Opening the door he saw that his oars and blankets were gone, and he began to feel that his theory might lead him to important discoveries. For fully five minutes he stood motionless, and gazed into the river, buried deep in his own thoughts. Then he soliloquized: “I wonder if Lily’s been stolen? S’pose, while we’ve been searchin’ fer her high an’ low, Foley an’ the galoot what whacked me jest took the little girl an’ carried her off in my boat? That ’ere story ’bout Dennis Foley buyin’ a ticket for Philadelphia struck me as fishy when I fust heerd it, an’ now I don’t believe it a t’all. They couldn’t git through the magazine gate ’thout the guards seein’ them, an’ whoever took my boat either came up the shore or down the shore. ’Tain’t likely they came from up shore, ’cause they could ’a

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found a hundred boats 'tween here an' the upper bridge."

Turning around, Sandy started down the beach toward the cemetery. He was studying carefully the ground beyond the point of high tide, and in a few moments reached the ravine where, two nights before, the three abductors had stopped, upon hearing Colonel Franklin and his sailing party approach.

"Well, I'll be durned," he exclaimed, for in the sand before his very eyes was the impress of four pairs of shoes. Two were evidently those of men, one small enough to be that of a boy, and one so tiny as to convince him it was that of a child.

"This is the way they come," he continued, "and there wuz three of 'em in the gang besides the little one, an' I'm sure er that."

He followed the footprints until he reached the old wharf. Peering through the rotten timbers, he said:

"That's a rum ol' hole. I don't believe Satan hisself would go in there, but I'm goin', an' see what I kin see."

Sandy had no difficulty in entering the cave, which he found strewn with whisky bottles, pieces of bread and newly-picked bones, evidence enough that some one had been there but a short time before. Penetrating deeper in his search, he made a find of the utmost importance. Lying at one side, and near a bed of rags, was an envelop addressed to Dennis Foley, and, on a peg which had been driven into the wall, was hanging an old hat, which he had often seen on Hildey's head.

Elated at the results of his quest, he began to retrace his steps, and in eager haste he left the cave. Picking his way along the slimy stones under the wharf, he soon neared the outlet and there was startled by the most significant of all his discoveries. Right before him lay the identical hoop which he had given the lost child only Christmas Day, and which bore the inscription, "From Sandy Coggles to Lillian Franklin."

Every suspicion now was confirmed, and he was sure he knew the culprits. Taking the hoop, he returned to his boat-house with all possible speed, and leaping into his skiff, paddled up the river, his eyes scanning the marsh lines on either bank of the channel. Arriving at the bridge, he learned by inquiry from the tender stationed there that he had not seen the Lillian coming up stream within the past three days.

"But," explained the bridge-tender, "I'm only on from six to six during daylight, and of course if anything comes through at night I wouldn't know about it. I'm pretty sure, though, there's been nothing up this way for a month of Sundays, 'cept Buck Wesley, who creeped up 'bout two hours ago, following a gang of ducks that uses right over there above Mayhew's Meadows. And the way Buck's been shooting for the last hour, he must be having a time and no mistake."

"Well, so long," called Sandy. "I guess I'll go up the river a little further and have a look." And once more he took up his paddles. As he came abreast of the Meadows he saw Buck Wesley coming out of the creek in his gunning skiff.

"Is that you, Sandy?" shouted the gunner.

"That's me," was the boy's answer.

"Come over here, I want to talk to you," requested Buck.

When Sandy got alongside the hunter's boat, he asked:

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``Well, Buck, what's the trouble?"

``No trouble, Sandy, but when I come up the river this mornin' I ain't been up for three weeks, it's been such pore weather for ducks I seen a bunch of widgeon go down right over here, an' as I skims up by the collard patch t'other side of the bridge, I noticed a boat lyin' in the mud, and when I gits near to her, I knows by the cut of her jib that she's yer Lillian."

``My Lillian? Wher'd yer say yer seen her?" asked Sandy excitedly.

``Why, by the collard patch, not fifty yards from the Causeway. She looked like she'd drifted on the marsh. I calc'lated when I got through shootin' that I'd pick her up an' take her down to yer landin'. The oars wuz in, an' I guess she must 'a' strayed from the shore, through somebody fergettin' to tie her up."

``I'm much 'bliged, Buck," thanked Sandy, ``but yer needn't bother. I'll bring her down, an' the next galoot that takes her an' lets her git away from him, is goin' to hear from me."

Sandy retraced the course he had come, and after turning on the other side of the bridge, had no trouble in finding his boat. She was lying on a sand-bar, but he soon succeeded in floating her and bringing her ashore.

Safely securing the skiff and the boat, he began another search along the beach, and almost immediately was rewarded by finding a knot of blue ribbon, such as he had often seen Lillian wear in her hair. Farther along, he discovered tracks in the sand. These he followed, Indian fashion, up the embankment, lost trace of them for a moment on the hardened surface of the carriage way, but speedily picked them up again in the soft soil that ran downward on the other side.

Then, it was easy to pursue them along a pathway that led to a graveled beach where a dozen or more skiffs had been drawn up and tied to stakes for the winter. From here on, all further traces were obliterated.

Thoroughly familiar with all the river craft belonging there, even to the individual ownership, Sandy noticed at once that one of the boats was missing, and that its painter had only recently been cut.

``Why, it's Willie Bagner's boat they've got," he said to himself as he recognized which boat was missing, ``an' I'll bet my life the scalawags are hidin' somewhere up the river."

Hurrying back, he rowed to the landing and started in haste for his home, with a plan of rescue fully developed in his mind. He sought out Leander, Dink and Gilbert, and asked them to call at his house without delay.

While Sandy's investigation had convinced him that Lillian was stolen, Colonel Franklin had been made to realize the same terrible fact in another and more brutal way. When he reached his office on the same afternoon, he found on his desk a letter that read as follows:

dere sur if U meen bizness i can put U on to whar your dorter is but its goin to kost U sum muney if U evr want to see her agin theres a big gang got her hid where U woodnt find hur in a 100 yerze but if U will plank down 10000 dolers sheze yourze if U dont you'll nevr see hur no moar if sheze wurth thet much to U U can git her by not blabin to nobody that yer got this leter an plankin down the rino taint no use fer U to try an git the police on our trax fer one uv the gang is alwayz with the kid an we have sworn to kill her if enny of us is jugged if U meen bizness an will leeve a noat under the big stone in front of the ded tree by oyster shell landin up the river we will git it an rite U where to meet us to bring the muney and git the child member we dont stand fer no trechery an if U squeel we ll no it and we ll take it out on the kid mums the word if yer want ter see the kid again c o d and fare deelin is our moto a word to the wize is sufishent

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The Colonel was completely unnerved by the horrible knowledge that his little daughter was in the hands of desperate criminals. Without delay he wrote a note offering to pay the money demanded, agreeing to deliver it at any spot they might name, and vowing to share his secret with no one.

Sealing the missive, he placed it carefully in his pocket, and drove out along the river turnpike to a point about a quarter of a mile from the place designated by the anonymous writer. Tying his horse to a tree, he walked through the woods, and hid the note under the stone mentioned in the letter. It was after nightfall when he reached home, where he was met with the heartrending and oft-repeated question,

“Have you heard anything from Lily?”

Fearing to betray himself, even to his family, and thus perhaps endanger the life of his child, he was compelled to answer, “No, not a thing.” With a heavy heart, he passed into his study. Supper was announced shortly afterward, and as the family gathered about the table, the father noticed that his son was not present.

“Where is Gilbert?” he inquired nervously.

“Sandy was here and asked Gilbert to come over and spend the night with him,” answered Mrs. Franklin. “I hadn’t the heart to refuse him, for I don’t believe any one has worked harder to find our lost darling than Sandy, and he seems to be the only one that can give Gilbert any consolation.”

“I think it’s better that the boys stop searching,” said the father. “They might get themselves into trouble; it’s too dangerous.”

“I don’t believe you could stop those boys from hunting for Lillian, if they had to go into the very jaws of death,” interposed the grandmother.

“Oh, well,” spoke the father; “they must not wear themselves out, and to-morrow, I will tell Gilbert and Sandy to leave the investigation to the police.”

“They’ll never do it,” objected the grandmother, “they love Lillian too much. You mark my words.”

At this very moment, Sandy, Leander, Gilbert and Dink were together, in Sandy’s little garret room. Sandy closed the door carefully, locked it, and called his companions about him in the middle of the room.

“Boys,” he whispered, “afore I sez anythin’, I wants yer to gimme yer word, honor bright, an’ cross yer heart three times, that yer won’t spout a syllable of what I tells yer to a soul.”

All were agreed, and the boy began:

“Now, it’s this ‘ere way. My boat wuz stolen an’ left, right below the upper bridge, an’ I foun’ footprints an’ this ‘ere piece of ribbon, which Gil knows b’longed to his sister, for she wore it round her hair. Willie Bagner’s skiff’s bin stolen, an’ I believe the party that took it hez got little Lily, because I foun’ the hoop I give her, an’ this envellup in the same place, an’ it seems to me the galoot whose name’s on it is hid somewhere up the river, an’ I’m goin’ after him if I has to go alone.”

“But you won’t go alone, while I’m alive,” insisted Leander, intensely excited.

“An’ I’m goin’, too, even if I never come back,” added Dink, taking it for granted that he was needed.

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“And you must take me,” said Gilbert imploringly.

The four boys grasped one another's hands, and Sandy declared in a solemn tone:

“We'll stick together to the bitter end.”

“What's your plan?” asked Leander, with great interest.

“Without breathin' a word to a soul, to–night about nine o'clock we wants to leave the boat–house, you an' Dink in one skiff, an' me an' Gil in t'other, an' sneak up the river, an' try so nobody won't see us. When we gits to the upper bridge, paddle in as close to the Causeway on the right, as we kin, huggin' the marsh all the way. Jest before we git to Beaver Dam, there's a deep gut that runs 'longside of it fer a hundred yards or more. Foller me in there, Leander, an' stay hid till I sez move. Don't speak a word, from the time we push off till I sez so. Beaver Dam is the loneliest creek in the world, an' mebbe Gil's little sister is kept in one of them ol' shacks what muskrat hunters live in, in the spring an' summer. If them galoots is in there, they're mighty apt ter come out late at night, when they don't expec' nobody's roun'. Of course, nacherelly they have some plan about gettin' paid fer little Lily, an' they ain't a–goin' to stay in hidin' without tryin' to find out the lay er the land, an' jest how hot the police is on their trail. My idee is to go an' lay in ambush fer 'em all night. If they don't come out, we'll explore in the mornin', an' if we don't find 'em hidin' roun' Beaver Dam, then we'll lay low all day, an' push up the river to–morrow night. But somehow, I think that's the place they would pick out to hide in. 'Tain't one person out er a million that would know how to git through Beaver Dam without gittin' lost, an' I'm a recollectin' I took Tom Foley through there onct an' that's why I'm goin' there to–night. I knows it so well, I could go through with my eyes shet.

“Each of us wants his pistol loaded fer keeps, a knife, an' about three yards er rope he can tie round his waist. Let's have a bite o' supper right here in my house, an' then we'll start fer the river, but each feller goin' alone, an' in a different way. Now, remember, no talkin' to nobody, an' let's all say honor bright, an' cross our hearts three times ag'in.”

Sandy was the first to arrive at the boat–house. Securing the paddles, he put them into the skiffs and watched for his companions. He had not long to wait. Gilbert came in a few moments, then Leander, and shortly afterward, Dink. Not a word was spoken. Sandy motioned Gilbert to sit in the center seat of the Dolly, while he took his accustomed place at the stern. Noiselessly they pushed into the stream, followed by Leander and Dink.

The tide was going out, and had, perhaps, two hours to ebb. The boys hugged the channel bank on the right, passed under the bridge unnoticed, and kept on their silent and anxious way, mile after mile. Finally, Sandy steered into a creek and glided softly against the mud bank, holding his skiff firmly by driving a paddle into the soft soil. Leander and Dink followed suit. That they might be screened from any one coming out of Beaver Dam, which was separated by a narrow strip of marsh–land, they lay flat on the bottom of their boats.

The night was not especially dark, for the moon was looking through a mist of hazy clouds. It was biting cold, and though the boys became numb from the many minutes of inactivity, not one of them moved. For fully an hour they had remained motionless, when faintly over the water was heard the splash, splash, splash, of paddles, far away.

The searching party were all alert in an instant, and with raised heads, peered cautiously over the top of the marsh line in the direction of the sounds. Hardly a minute had passed, when out of the shadows that hid the entrance to Beaver Dam, there came slowly a skiff into the clear water. It approached to within fifteen feet of the hidden boys, when they recognized a voice, distinctly saying:

“I hope that guy Franklin's ben up to the landin' an' left the note where I tol' him to, an' don't try no shenanigan.”

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``He ain't goin' to try no flapdoodles with us," was the quick answer.

``Well, if he knows when he's well off," the first voice resumed, ``he'll come round with the rhino mighty quick, an' give us no more trouble."

``I kin see us livin' like gent'men, a'ready."

``Gent'men born an' " the other began, but the last of his sentence was lost as the boat turned up the river, and the cadence of the paddles died in the distance.

Sandy waited until the rascals had disappeared around the bend, then shoving his skiff quickly alongside Leander's, he whispered into the latter's ear:

``Me an' Gil is goin' in to Beaver Dam. Yer knows them two fellers, an' so do I. One of 'em is the feller what whacked me, an' the t'other is that bum Hildey. If they gits here afore I come back, you an' Dink'll have to do somethin' desp'ret."

``All right," said Leander, clutching his pistol, ``you can trust me."

Sandy rounded the point that divided the two creeks, and in a short time had paddled past the trees and vines that hung over and partly covered the entrance to Beaver Dam. The boat was managed with consummate skill, now left, now right, through the sinuous waterway, and the two boys had gone fully half a mile, when, without warning, they were rudely jolted as the skiff grated harshly on a bar. Ordinarily, such an incident would have been without effect upon them, but now their nerves were so highly strung, that the noise of the boat rubbing against the gravel seemed as loud as the report of a cannon.

Using all possible force, Sandy and Gilbert succeeded in shoving their craft back into the water. Then they pressed forward into the shadow of an embankment on the left, and not a moment too soon did they reach Gover, for the door of a hut was thrown open, and the voice of Tom Foley was heard, asking:

``Is that you, dad?"

An instant later Foley was seen standing in the dim light of the doorway, shading his eyes and peering into the darkness.

``I say, dad, is that you?" came again. ``I'll be doggoned if I didn't think I heerd somebody comin'. I guess 'tain't nuthin'," looking anxiously to the right and left. ``I cert'nly does git scared out er my boots aroun' here, though, when I'm left alone. I'm goin' to wake up the brat an' make her keep me comp'ny," and the door closed with a bang.

He had hardly gone inside when the piteous cry of a child was heard, ``Please don't beat me, Tom."

``I ain't beatin' yer; go ahead, dance fer me."

Sandy and Gilbert were fairly crazed, and in their anger rushed up toward the hut.

Again came the cry, ``Please don't hit me, Tom."

``Dance, I say," and the sharp swish of a whip was heard.

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It took but a second for Sandy to bound into the room. Surprised and terrified, Foley made a dart for the door, but was met by Gilbert, who, pistol in hand, held him stock still. In desperation Foley reached for a club and ran back of the frightened child in the hope that she might serve as guard against his assailant. Like a flash, Sandy followed, and knocked the cowardly brute senseless with the barrel of his pistol.

Gilbert ran to his sister, and, taking her up, showered loving kisses upon her. With her arms clasped about his neck and her head nestling on his shoulder, she cried:

“Oh, Gil, I'm so glad you've come. I've been waiting all this time for you. I knew Sandy would come, because he ain't afraid of robbers, or anybody else, even if he had his hands tied behind him. I've been praying for you every minute, and here you are.” Again Gilbert pressed his sister to his heart, and kissed her.

Young Foley was still lying unconscious, as the result of the blow he had received, and Sandy was clutching him tightly by the throat.

“Take yer sister, little codger,” said Sandy, “wrap her up, git in the skiff, an' I'll be with yer as soon as I tie this chuckle-headed idiot fast and tight.”

Gilbert left the hut with Lillian, while the other boy remained long enough to loosen the rope around his waist, and bind the young ruffian securely. Then he placed him in a corner of the room. Locking the door behind him, Sandy joined Gilbert in the skiff, and together they paddled furiously out of the creek into the river.

The moon was up in all her splendor, and objects on the water were plainly visible for some distance. Lillian was seated in the bow, facing the two boys at the paddles. Leander and Dink fell in the wake of Sandy's skiff, about ten yards in the rear.

As the party reached the middle of the channel, a skiff came into view from the bend, a short way above, and steered directly toward them. With a cry, Lillian stood up:

“Oh, Gil, here come those two bad men that took me away.”

The boys turned, and they, too, recognized Dennis Foley and Hildey as the occupants of the approaching boat.

“Lie flat, little one,” whispered Sandy, “an' don't move till I tells yer.”

The child obeyed, but already Foley and his partner had espied her, and it was evident they were using all their efforts to catch up. Leander now called:

“It's the same gang, Sandy, that came out of the creek. What shall we do?”

“Paddle fer all ye're worth,” was shouted back.

“Hold up, or we'll shoot,” yelled Dennis Foley.

With that a pistol-shot was heard coming from the direction of the pursuers, but the bullet went wide of its mark, and the boys sped on.

“Don't waste yer load unless yer haveto,” cautioned Sandy, “'cause yer won't have time to put in 'nother, an' I don't want er draw their fire, fer fear they might hit Lily.”

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The race had become one of life and death. The boys strained to the utmost their strong young muscles, and, with paddles bent almost double, drove their little craft like the wind before them. Down past Turtle Creek they flew; Licking Banks were soon left behind, and shortly, they were alongside the Sycamores. Dink looked back over his shoulder, and whispered:

``We ain't gained on 'em a bit, an' they seem to be goin' strong."''

When the Meadows were reached, Dink said again:

``They're comin' like everythin'."''

``Don't weaken," urged Leander; ``as long as we're between them and Sandy's skiff, they'll have to kill us before they can get to Lillian."''

The moon was casting its light on the waters like a great silvery path, and the splashing of the paddles was the only sound that awakened the echoes. Again came the sharp report of a pistol, and Dink dodged, as if by instinct. He wheeled in his seat and shot point-blank at Foley, but the ball imbedded itself in the side of the skiff behind and did no further damage.

``That's tit for tat," said Dink, ``but it wuz a mighty close call fer me. When the bullet whizzed past my ear I thought I was plugged, sure."''

There were now not more than fifteen yards between the boys and their pursuers. Turning about, Leander saw Hildey raise his pistol and take careful aim at him. Quick as thought, the boy fired first, and Hildey uttered a sharp cry of pain, as his right arm fell helpless, and his pistol dropped into the water.

``Curse the luck!" muttered Foley. ``Don't give up, pard; we'll ketch 'em afore they git much further."''

Though Hildey's right arm was useless, he plied the paddle with his left, and the men continued to gain. As the boys passed through under the bridge, Leander's boat was abreast of Sandy, who whispered:

``I'll take the swash on the right that goes through the big marsh and comes out at the Devil's Elbow. You hug the channel bank, an' mebbe we'll fool 'em."''

Sandy knew that, after the river left the bridge, it went almost southerly for half a mile, then made an abrupt turn at right angles, pursued its way westward for another quarter of a mile, and then met the swash channel, which cut diagonally through the big marsh. At this junction of the two streams a whirlpool called the Devil's Elbow had been formed, a treacherous spot for small craft, and requiring rare skill to pass in safety.

When Sandy told Leander to take the main channel, it was with a desperate hope that Foley and Hildey would be in doubt, for the moment, which skiff to follow as they came out under the bridge. Within himself, he reasoned that this hesitation, on their part, would consume sufficient time to permit the boys to gain a lead and reach in safety the landing, two miles below.

``The chances are jest even—Stephen," he said to Gilbert, ``though it separates us from Leander, till we reach the Devil's Elbow."''

But alas! Sandy's reasoning failed him for once this time.

As Foley and Hildey came through under the bridge, the former cried:

The Conspirators

“Steer to the right channel an’ foller that boat; that’s the one the kid’s in.”

“They’re after us, darn ‘em,” said Sandy, “but we’re gittin’ ahead bully. Keep it up, Gil, an’ we’ll come out all right, see if we don’t.”

Dripping with perspiration, and with hands burned and blistered, Sandy and Gilbert were forging ahead and gaining on their pursuers, straining every nerve to increase their lead. As they rounded a bend in the channel, Hildey shouted:

“There’s yer chance to plug ‘em, pard. Shoot!”

Foley obeyed, and the boys’ skiff, which was a metallic one, was bored through by the pistol ball. The water poured through the hole, and Sandy shouted to Gilbert:

“Drop yer paddle; take yer hat an’ put it over the leak, tigh’ as yer kin; bale with the other hand, or we’ll sink in a minit. Lily, sit up, so yer won’t get wet; but don’t show yer head,” and with a courage born of despair, Sandy renewed his efforts.

Foley was gaining rapidly, and it seemed that only a miracle could prevent the boy’s capture before they reached the Devil’s Elbow.

Three minutes passed with only the sound of the lightning–like dip of the paddles. Another short bend in the channel, and a hundred yards ahead was the confluence of the two currents, which were ever at war.

“Keep on bailing, Gil,” cried Sandy, “an’ when we git past the Elbow, if they’re too close to us, I’m goin’ to use my pistol on ‘em, but I don’t want ter shoot till I can make the shot tell fer all it’s worth. Steady, Lily; hold tigh’, Gil; don’t move, I’ll git yer through without swampin’, ‘cause I knows every current in the Elbow.”

Through the mad swirl of waters the boy held his boat, and steered her into the quiet tide beyond.

Leander and Dink were just turning the bend of the main channel an eighth of a mile away, and the skiff containing Foley and Hildey had reached the outer current of the eddy.

“Now you’ve got ‘em,” yelled Hildey, as Sandy’s skiff veered to the left, not twenty yards from the other.

“Not if I knows it,” cried Sandy as he shot square at Foley, the ball going through the sleeve of his coat, but leaving him unharmed.

“Curse yer fer a fool!” came from Foley, dropping his paddle and standing up in the skiff, which now had nothing to guide it but Hildey’s exhausted arm. The skiff was rocking violently. Foley attempted to balance himself as he raised his pistol to shoot. In a flash the frail craft was caught in the conflicting currents, it careened and capsized, and the two men were battling for life in the whirlpool.

Sandy was so intent on escape that he had gone some distance down stream before realizing he was no longer pursued. Suddenly an agonizing cry was borne on the midnight air:

“Help! Help! I’m drownin’!”

The boy rested on his paddle, and scanned the river in the direction of the voice.

“Don’t let’s let ‘em drown like rats in a hole,” said Sandy, and he started his boat back toward the bend.

The Conspirators

“Gil, gimme yer pistol. They may be tryin' to play some trick on us, an' if they are, we'll be ready for 'em.”

The precaution was unnecessary, for when they came near, they saw the upturned skiff circling around in the eddy, its paddles bobbing with the waves, and the hats of Foley and Hildey slowly drifting toward the bank.

Leander and Dink, meanwhile, had come up, and with the other two boys remained for fully half an hour waiting for some sign of the two robbers, but in vain; for far beneath the surface of the water in the maddening current, the ill-spent lives of Foley and Hildey were ended. They were dead in the cruel embrace of the Devil's Elbow.