

CHAPTER XV - The Circus Boys on the Mississippi

In Chapter XV of "The Circus Boys on the Mississippi," the Sparling circus fleet is navigating downstream smoothly until an unexpected commotion occurs. Teddy, having had a significant role in a previous cabin incident, manages to sleep through the chaos that unfolds later, whereas, Phil and the rest of the circus members are not as undisturbed.

The crux of the disturbance is centered around Mr. Cummings, the pilot steering the "Marie." His night is filled with irritation and threats of revenge against Teddy for an earlier embarrassment. This anger is further fueled by his struggles to navigate the vessel, avoiding sandbars and dealing with the jeers of the circus crew. The tension escalates as Cummings detects an unknown presence, eventually facing what he fears is an escaped lion but turns out to be the donkey, January, causing havoc on deck.

January, mistaking the pilot house for an adversary, launches a raucous attack, leading Cummings to a frenzied state. He barricades himself inside, mistakenly signals full speed astern which throws the "Marie" into chaos, and unsuccessfully attempts to defend the pilot house with gunfire, believing the circus's animals have been unleashed.

The narrative reaches a fever pitch as Phil and Teddy awaken to the uproar. Phil, realizing the grave danger of the boat running wild, bravely takes control of the wheel, while Teddy identifies January as the source of the commotion, rather than a threatening beast. With quick thinking and inherent circus agility, Phil manages to halt and then correct the boat's course, but not without the crew and Mr. Sparling, the circus manager, frantically trying to comprehend and mitigate the chaos. Mr. Sparling's intervention proves critical in restoring order, as he forcefully directs Cummings back to his piloting duties, ensuring the safety of the fleet and averting potential disaster.

The chapter deliciously blends humor and suspense, showcasing the resilience and camaraderie among the circus crew whilst highlighting the unpredictable adventures that come with life on the Mississippi River.