

They certainly presented the appearance of a happy coterie. The studious ones contented themselves by bothering the crew with rapid questions, the mischievous found amusement in playing a variety of tricks on their mates, while more adventurous members of the party scaled the rigging, much to the nervous horror of the indulgent Professor.

So far, the expedition had been a success. Dick Wilson shadowed the enjoyment of the boys somewhat by mourning over Ned Darrow's absence, and Ernest Blake railed considerably at Ralph Warden's disagreeable way, but on the whole, good feeling was the order of the day.

The latter had become more unpopular than ever since the journey began. He had the good fortune a year previous to visit the Pacific coast with his father, and when he was not spoiling the anticipations of his mates by explaining what they were to see, he was sneering unpleasantly at their ecstasies over sights that were not new to him.

They passed down the harbour, and out to sea about sunset. The evening was a glorious one, and, as the stars came out, the boys were enchanted with the scene about them.

The land faded from view at last, and passing ships became less frequent. The appearance of a light-ship held their attention for some time. Then, as the novelty of the hour wore off, they retired for the night.

Of land sights there were few for the ensuing four or five days. The weather was delightful, and the Neptune, favoured by fair breezes, passed down the coast, at the average rate of ten knots an hour.

Not a soul on board, looking at the fastened hatches, dreamed that a stow-away might be contained in the silent hold. The cook's pantry was well provisioned, and no occasion had yet arisen to go below decks.

Yet, within a few feet of the merry, tramping crew of boys, one of their number, whom they believed to be left behind in disgrace in Ridgeland, was having a fight for existence unseen by any human eye, was struggling patiently and manfully for the liberty of which a strange accident had deprived him.

There were heaven's sweet breezes and the brilliant sunlight for the joyous coterie on deck.

To the lonely prisoner in the hold of the Neptune it was a desperate voyage in the dark.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE DARK.

When the real loneliness and peril of his position dawned over the mind of Ned Darrow, he well-nigh gave way with horror and despair.

He beat the dull walls of his prison place frantically, he shouted and shrieked for help, and then sank to the floor, weeping and exhausted.

Little by little his mind recovered its balance, moment by moment boyish fear gave way to courage and philosophical resolution, and finally, grown calmer and more hopeful, he reflected deeply on his situation.

"I must think of myself only for the present," he murmured grimly. "I must bring my whole mind to bear upon the real merits of my situation. While I was asleep they have loaded the ship without discovering me, and I am walled in. They must unload, or at least visit the hold before long."

He imagined that there must be some loop-hole amid the cargo, some unfilled space through which he might hope to crawl towards liberty.

"Oh, for a light!" breathed Ned, fervently. "Even if only for a moment. If I could but see around me the matches, the candle! Oh, I hope they will light!"

He was tremulously suspenseful as he began to ransack his pockets. When Mr. James and himself stole into the freight car at Ogden, they had provided themselves with the means of securing a light when needed.

Ned now found the end of a candle and several matches in his pocket. The matches were the brown lucifers which are almost impervious to dampness, and as he drew one across the sole of his shoe, it lit quite readily. He lit his candle and flashed its rays around him, the close air causing it to flicker fitfully. His survey was a discouraging one, for the illumination revealed a condition of affairs even worse than he had thought.

On three sides showed the ribbed, unbroken surface of the interior of the hull of the ship; over-head, far beyond reach, were the stout timbers of the deck; between him and the hatchway and cabins, a solid wall of merchandise.

Boxes, barrels, kegs and cases, piled tightly together, rose up, tier on tier, as high as the deck, while, apparently, beyond them other parcels filled in the entire space of the hold.

He had read of stow aways in the same position as himself, and he took hope as he remembered where patience and courage had enabled them to surmount great obstacles in reaching the outside world again.

He was beginning to experience a slight sea-sickness from the increased motion of the ship, and he made a pillow of his coat and went to sleep again.

Nothing save the gliding, swishing sound of water beating against the hull greeted Ned's ears when he again awoke. His first thought was the candle which he lighted, and ruefully regarded the shortness of his only illuminator.

"I must be careful of it," he murmured, as he counted the matches.

There was barely a dozen of them. He set the candle on the floor, shuddering, despite himself, as it suggested the thought of fire in these close quarters. The fear of fire had brought in its train of dread suggestions another anxious thought.

Hunger and thirst! He had not thought of this before, but it came to him now with a force that terrified him. To perish of slow starvation and tormenting thirst! It was horrible to think of it.

"There must be some articles of food among all that pile of merchandise," he made himself believe. "I won't let idle fears overcome me. I'll work if only to keep my hands and brain busy."

He had a stout, sharp knife in his pocket. He drew off his coat, threw down his hat, and lifted the candle to observe the various packages. The lower tier of boxes and bales were large and solid, but as he reached up, tapping each box as he went with the knife, he found one smaller than the rest that sounded more hollow, and determined to assail it.

Ned blew out the precious light after getting his bearings, and then by the sheer sense of feeling began cutting into the soft wood of the box.

It was slow work, and he was compelled to stop several times to rest. He could keep no reckoning of time, but estimated that it was about noon when he finally found that the knife penetrated to some soft substance inside the box.

(To be Continued.)