

The boat would be lifted twenty feet aloft, and then sink into the trough of the sea with a dive that seemed certain to swamp it.

Suddenly a tremendous wave swept it up and forward. It came down with a crash, motionless, while wave after wave dashed over it and filled it with water.

"Sit still, if you value your lives!" shouted Ned, in thrilling tones. "We are very near the shore and the boat is caught between the rocks."

His words quieted the boys, on the verge of a panic, and his action a moment later made Professor Ballentine thank Providence for Ned's presence.

For the latter had uncoiled a long line he found in the boat, affixed it stoutly to the bow, and lifted himself over the edge of the boat on the slippery rocks.

He waited for a receding wave, and then made a dash for the shore. The path was a rocky one, and as he paid out the rope he managed to get beyond the reach of the pursuing waves by running rapidly toward the beach.

He gained a spot where the water was scarcely ankle deep and tied the rope taut around a huge rock. He thrilled to quick triumph and hope, for now there was a means of every soul in the life boat reaching the shore.

The waves swept him off his feet as he retraced his way to the boat, but he kept a firm clasp on the rope and reached the waiting passengers in safety.

His identity had been discovered by this time. Even amid their peril the mystery of his strange appearance had startled and bewildered the boys, and a dozen welcoming voices spoke his name as he explained to Professor Ballentine what he had done.

He made the old tutor descend first, and grope along the line for the shore. One by one the boys followed. They seemed to reach the shore in safety, and grouped around the Professor, whose voice was raised in grateful thanksgiving as he viewed their dim forms on the lonely beach.

"All here," he spoke. "Ned Darrow, your bravery"

His words were suddenly checked by a sharp query from Ernest Blake.

"Ralph Warden; where is he? Ralph! Ralph!"

There was no answer to the call. The Professor gasped wildly:

"Oh, he cannot be lost! Search the beach, boys."

Ned Darrow seized the rope again and crept along it toward the boat. His eyes pierced the darkness searchingly.

"Thank heaven!"

Every emotion save fervent joy was absent in his heart as he seized a form washed to and fro between two rocks. He forgot all the past bitterness of rivalry as he bore the unconscious Ralph Warden ashore.

Ten minutes time brought back life to the half-drowned lad. In tremulous tones the Professor called over the names of his scholars:

"Ernest Blake, John Kelsey, Paul Brown, Elmer Ray, Willie Ray, Eugene Dale, Charles Wilson, Richard Wilson, Willis Hardy, Aleck Dobson, Sam Pardee, Ned Darrow, Alan Deane, Phil Talcott, William Lee, Ralph Warden, George Mitchell, Harold Gould, James Sheldon, Robert Banks."

"Here; all here!"

The old Professor's voice was tremulous and thrilling as he briefly directed them to carefully pick their way after him along the beach.

What was the discomfort and uncertainty of the hour compared to the perils through which they had just passed. So blissful was the sense of safety that for the

first time in many hours the old ring of honest laughter and careless, boyish sport, broke forth spontaneously.

The veil of darkness and storm was gradually lifting from the bleak scene, but they could form no definite idea as to their surroundings.

Only a rugged, rocky expanse was dimly visible.

"We had better find a sheltered spot until morning breaks," suggested Professor Ballentine, and Ned was foremost in exploring the immediate vicinity to carry out his ideas.

They found a cave-like indentation under a towering cliff where the rain could not beat nor the wind penetrate.

Huge masses of dry sea-weed lined its interior, and Ned had soon discovered a water-tight match safe full of dry lucifers, in the possession of one of his companions.

He knew from what the captain and mate had said aboard of the Neptune, that the place they had reached could be no part of a mainland.

"It is some solitary island, probably," he said to the boys, as he ignited some sea-weed and a blazing fire soon illuminated the dark recesses of their temporary abode.

The cheerful warmth of the fire imparted first vitality and then somnolence to the exhausted boys.

One by one they sank to sleep on the soft moss, slumbering as serenely as if in their comfortable beds in the old academy at Ridgeland.

Professor Ballentine sat thoughtful but placid, gazing into the fire. Ned, his mind upon the captain and mate of the ill-fated Neptune, kept feeding the fire and gazing seaward.

Finally, both gave way to exhaustion, and sleep, deep and refreshing, fell over the care-troubled Professor and all his rescued charges.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TWENTY CRUSOES.

On a jutting point of rock far above the strange resting place of the cast-away boys, a bird of gay plumage had built its nest. As morning broke it began its matutinal twitterings, then its plaintive overture of harmony, and finally broke forth into glorious, melodious song.

The echoes of its voice mingling with the dull swish of the waves on the beach disturbed the sleepers. They awoke finally, as the most restless of their number arose to his feet, and soon twenty curious, hungry boys dotted the shore, enjoying the novelty of their uncertain situation and awaiting the first directing words of Professor Ballentine.

It was not long before the latter knew most of the details of the circumstances which had led to Ned Darrow becoming one of their number.

Ned had withheld all allusion to the culpability of Mr. James in the study episode, and had only stated that the under-mastee had insisted on following the expedition, and he had accompanied him.

In view of his harsh experience the Professor could not chide him. Still believing him guilty of breaking into the study, he forgot the former enormity of the offence in his eyes when he realized that but for Ned's dauntless energy one of their number, Ralph Warden—perhaps all of them—might never have reached land.

"One moment, gentlemen!" said the Professor, as he