

Poor Mr. James fell headlong, his head striking a step, he lay bleeding and unconscious at the dark bottom of the area.

Markham had torn the satchel from his victim's hand. He cast a glance at the latter, and then, seeing no one in view, quietly sauntered away from the spot.

"The boy's out of the way," he muttered, coolly. "He had no business standing up in the boat. I didn't push him over, and I wasn't going to get in trouble staying there and searching for his body. As to this man, he probably has the papers of the land at Sandy Flat in this satchel, and as I made them a fair offer and they refused, I'm bound to have the land anyway."

It was late in the afternoon when Mr. James returned to consciousness, and it took another hour to dress his wounded head and collect his scattered wits.

The inexperienced under-master was loth to believe that such hardened characters as Abel Morgan lived in the world, yet he had recognized his assailant as the man left behind at Ridgeland.

"What does it all mean?" he mused, perplexedly. "Could that man have followed us here? He has stolen Ned's satchel, and with it the papers to the land. They will do him no good, for they are recorded. But I must find Ned. Maybe this villain, for villain he surely is, has done the lad some harm."

Mr. James reached the wharf where the schooner had been that morning, watching closely for some sign of Ned.

He stood stock still, a cheerless, horrible feeling of disappointment and dread creeping over him, as he saw that the schooner was nowhere in sight.

"My man," he managed to ask of a sailor on the wharf, "can you tell me where the ship that was here this morning is?"

"Gone—sailed," was the reply.

"Gone!" repeated Mr. James, in a choked, unnatural tone.

"Yes. The Neptune slipped her moorings two hours ago!"

CHAPTER XI.

A STRANGE PASSENGER.

The schooner had indeed sailed, and the bewildered man, who stood rooted to the wharf, staring blankly at the water, was destined to devote many a weary day to an ineffectual search for Ned Darrow and Professor Ballentine ere he heard of the good ship Neptune again.

And in that ship, a snug passenger, brought thither by a series of marvelously strange circumstances, was the object of his solicitous anxiety, Ned Darrow.

For when the criminal and cowardly John Markham abandoned the victim of a design or an accident, Ned knew not which, the boy had not sunk beneath the waves to rise no more, as the villain supposed.

The episode had occurred near a light-house near land, and when Ned arose to the surface after his chilling plunge, it intervened between himself and Markham.

Thus the latter believed him drowned; but a friendly eye had witnessed the mishap, and, as Ned managed to keep himself above water, a voice shouted down from a window in the light-house—

"Keep up your courage, my little man; I'll soon have you safely out of your trouble."

Immediately a heavy object attached to a rope came bounding down to the water's edge.

It proved to be a chair, and Ned clasped it eagerly.

Looking up, he saw the light-house-keeper pulling at the other end of the rope over a pulley, and knew that the chair was for elevating visitors and others into the tower of the light-house.

"Hold fast while I pull you up!" shouted the man, but just then a boat, containing a sailing party of three persons attracted by the accident, came to the spot, and Ned was lowered to the boat.

He saw no sign of Markham's boat in the vicinity, and was rather reticent in answering the rapid questioning of his companions.

He thanked them heartily when he reached the land, and at once set out to find the ship Neptune.

It took several hours to reach the city and to locate the wharf where the ship lay, but at last he gained the spot.

His clothes were quite dry from his rapid walk, but he felt concerned as he saw no trace of Mr. James around.

The crew of the Neptune were lounging on the wharf, and Ned climbed over the rail and walked around the deck.

Twice he was ordered out of the way, and heard one of the men say that some freight for loading would soon arrive.

In his wanderings over the ship, Ned had the curiosity to descend into the hold.

"I might as well stay on the ship," he decided, "for Mr. James will probably return with the Professor."

He found a deserted spot in a dark corner of the hold, and sat down to rest. He had miscalculated his vigilance, for the long ride on the jolting cars, the plunge in the bay, and the brisk walk to the ship had exhausted him.

He nodded and slept ere he had been in the hold five minutes. So profound was his slumber that it must have been hours ere he awoke.

When finally he was restored to wakefulness, it was with a bewildered sense of fright and confusion that he attempted to realize his situation.

Before his strained vision was the blackness of starless night; not a ray of light relieved the darkness.

He reached forth his hands with a cry of dread uncertainty.

On every side they met a hard, blank wall.

The air was close and warm; his feet moved unsteadily. He was in some moving object.

Then, as he heard the swish of waters, steady and dull, as he experienced the dizzy feeling accompanying a first voyage at sea, he knew what had occurred.

The Neptune had set sail, and Ned Darrow was a prisoner in its hold!

CHAPTER XII.

AT SEA.

"Hurrah! she's started."

A dozen voices caught up the words as the Neptune loosed her cables, and set sail from San Francisco harbour.

Upon the deck, flushed with excitement and pleasure, stood the nineteen boys comprising the passengers of the ship, while Professor Ballentine with benignant face seemed to experience a quiet satisfaction in the happiness of his youthful charges.

"I declare, it makes me young again to see their delight," he remarked to Captain Barr. "From Salt Lake City down to the big trees of Calaveras, the lads have been in one joyful fever of mirth."