

at the wheel the schooner's gone, for there ain't a lubber aboard sober enough to help him."

"I will help him."

A form had sprung mysteriously from the neighbourhood of the fore-castle, the form of a boy, hatless, coatless, with disordered attire and disheveled hair.

"You?" cried the captain, amazedly "Who are you; where did you come from?"

Professor Ballentine stared wildly at the uncouth figure before them, clinging to the rail for support, adjudging the appearance of the new comer a delusion of the senses.

For it was Ned Darrow.

CHAPTER XV.

A TERRIBLE NIGHT.

Well might Professor Ballentine be amazed, to be suddenly confronted by the boy he believed to be safe at home in the academy at Ridgeland.

For the moment he was speechless, while Captain Barr turned sharply on Ned.

"A stowaway, eh?" he muttered. "Get below; this is man's work."

"Please let me help you, sir," pleaded Ned. "I'm strong and willing, and I know I can help that poor old man at the wheel yonder."

"Go lively then, and get swept overboard, the first big wave."

Ned Darrow ran across the deck and managed to reach the wheel.

He slipped and fell twice, but regained his footing, and astounded grim Ben Banks with the words—

"I'm to help you, sir."

"Take hold, then."

The delighted Ned grasped the handles of the wheel with a hearty will. He heard old Ben chuckle and utter something about "the idea of that chick doing anything; he'd soon get tired of it."

But he soon changed his mind. Ned worked manfully. It was the overbalancing effect of his efforts that so lightened the mate's labours that his grizzled face beamed more kindly in the flare of the ship's lantern.

"You're getting wet through, lad," he said. "Go and get a coat and hat. There won't be much let up to this for a time. I'm thinking."

Ned tumbled across the deck to a box indicated by the mate, and secured a stiff coat and hat.

He presented a comical appearance as he donned the articles, several sizes too large for him, but they were weather-tight and protecting.

About to return to the wheel, Ned paused with a cry of affrighted recollection. He hastened to the spot where the captain stood.

"He must come below; he is one of my scholars," Professor Ballentine was saying at that moment.

"He's got the pluck of a sailor all the same. What is it, my little man?" inquired the captain.

"Oh, sir! I forgot to tell you, but the ship's a-leak."

Captain Barr looked startled.

"You don't mean it, lad?" he uttered, huskily.

"Yes, sir. It's in the hold, where I was hidden."

The captain hastened to the fore-castle, with an ominous face.

A huge wave sent Ned into the lee scuppers as he spoke. Professor Ballentine's face was white with ap-

prehension until he saw Ned reach the mate's side in safety. Then he went down into the cabin.

Ned resumed his place at the wheel, a post from which he never flinched for many an hour.

Captain Barr had managed to arouse some of the sailors, and the pumps were rigged. The men, however, worked without discipline, and in a state of mutinous inebriety drank and worked only as they deemed their own safety demanded it.

It was a serious instance to Ned Darrow of the soul-deadening power of drink.

Captain Barr stormed and worried, and at last came to the mate.

"It's no use, Ben Banks," he said. "Those lubbers won't work, and they're talking about pulling off in the long-boat."

The mate snorted angrily, and gave the wheel an extra twist, as if he was torturing the recalcitrant sailors.

"Look away, captain!" spoke Ben. "The crew are up to mischief."

Sure enough, half a dozen of them were loosing the davits of the long-boat. They laughed at the captain when he ordered them back to the pumps. Liquor had made demons of them.

"You cowards, will you leave the passengers to perish?"

"You look to them and yourself, Captain Barr," was the defiant response. "We didn't ship except to carry cargo, and the ship's been doomed an hour since. Take the other boat if you want to. We'll trust to the open water now."

Ten minutes later the long-boat, containing every member of the crew, fell astern, and the last thing dropped into it was the half-filled cask of liquor.

"Poor wretches!" muttered Barr. "Their boat can't live an hour in that angry sea."

During all these occurrences the boys in the cabin were for the most part unconscious of their real peril. More than one face had blanched, however, when the ship lurched and rolled, and they saw the Professor, pale and concerned, watch the cabin door as if momentarily expecting an announcement from the captain that all was lost.

Ralph Warden added not a little to the Professor's cares. He was wild with terror at times, and bemoaned aloud the adverse fate that had sent him into peril.

There was no sleep on board the Neptune that night, for the Professor kept the boys around him, ready for any contingency.

On deck, all through the night, the captain, the mate, and brave Ned Darrow, saw the ship plough the waters like a rocket.

Every sail was gone, yet the wheel was never deserted. It was about four o'clock in the morning that Ben Banks uttered a groan of dismay.

The wheel chain had broken, and the rudderless wreck suddenly tossed in the arms of the storm like a play-thing.

The desperate fight for life and safety had terminated. They were at the mercy of the storm now.

"She's struck!"

As Captain Barr uttered the ominous words, the schooner crashed upon some rocks, while every timber shivered and bent as if being crushed to pieces.

"Land ahead!" sang out Banks, staring through the darkness.

"The boat!" cried the captain. "We'll beat to pieces on these breakers in five minutes."

"Aye, aye, sir!" and the mate sprang forward to execute the order.