

He did not speak, but stood staring curiously, breathlessly, at his deliverers. One of them held a lantern, while his companion was pulling the boxes aside and flinging them behind him.

"It must be here," Ned heard him say. "Drat a temptance captain, anyway!"

"Yes," growled his companion. "He expects us to weather a storm like this without a drop of spirits."

"Ridic'ous," commented the other. "He's had the keg of liquor put way back here."

Ned shrank back and watched the men closely. He saw one of them reach the cask he had found the liquor in, and drag it from its place.

"I've got it," he cried, triumphantly. "Now to smuggle it on deck. We need it more than the fever sufferers at Panama, eh, Jack?"

The other chuckled serenely. Ned saw them creep away from the spot, dragging the cask with them.

He climbed to the opening the men had made, he crept over a mass of merchandise in their very tracks.

They disappeared through an opening into the forward part of the ship, and the lantern was extinguished.

Ned, following in their wake, felt the breath of a chilling blast on his face, he heard the shrieking tempest without.

It held no terrors for Ned Barron at that moment. His long imprisonment was terminated: the voyage in the dark, amid the horrors of the hold, had come to an end at last.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN DEADLY PERIL.

On the deck of the Neptune a weird and terrible scene was in progress.

Like darkness and havoc suddenly transforming a sunny, smiling landscape into gloom and ruin, the transition from safety to peril, from enjoyment to dread, had come with fateful rapidity over Professor Ballentine and his students.

The voyage, for several hundred miles down the coast from San Francisco, had been unmarred by one unpleasant incident. The Neptune had stopped at two ports, and then set snowy sails for the broad waters off shore, bound for a South American port and return.

The days glided by like a dream, until one morning, as he came on deck, the Professor found Captain Barr too busy to speak to him, and, with a serious face, consulting the barometer and compass.

The sea was chopping and ugly, the sky gray and overcast, the ship close-reefed and almost motionless. There was an ominous moaning of a high breeze to the windward, while quick, stern orders were issued to the crew, who obeyed silently, with anxious faces.

The Professor discerned a difference in the ensemble of the deck to the evening before. He looked intently at the captain as he came hastily forward and addressed him.

"You will keep the young gentlemen below until further orders, if you please, Professor Ballentine," said Barr.

"There is danger, then?" asked the Professor, anxiously.

"There will be," replied the captain, pointing to a low bank of clouds in the west. "A storm will soon break upon us."

The Professor did not impart the information he had

received to the boys in the cabin. It was not long, however, before he realized the truth of the captain's prediction.

Soon the tempest broke upon the schooner with terrific fury. The wind whistled through the rigging, and drove the ship before it like a being sentient with mortal terror. For the first time since leaving the land, the passengers knew foul weather.

Through that day the boys were kept close prisoners in the cabin. When night fell the usual merriment of the evening hour was absent. The boys clustered together in little knots, anxiously discussing the situation, or lay in their bunks, sick with the rolling of the ship.

Professor Ballentine ventured up the cabin stairs shortly after dark. The wind had risen to a hurricane. The mainsail was in tatters, while huge waves lashed over the deck of the ship.

Captain Barr, weather-beaten and hoarse-voiced, shook his head ominously as the Professor gravely inquired—

"Is the storm abating any, captain?"

"It's getting worse, and I fear we are in for a time of it," was the depressing reply. "The mainsail is gone, and the crew are worn out. I just had to send two men below."

What Captain Barr had said was no exaggeration. The ship was suffering terribly from stress of weather. Half the crew had gone below exhausted, and only Ben Banks, the old mate, and the captain worked with the energy the needs of the hour required.

Twice the men had demanded liquor to revive their spirits, and as often they had been sternly refused.

"Let the cook get you hot coffee. No liquor in a time like this. You'll need all your wits before morning, if I don't mistake," said the captain.

He heard the grumbings of the crew, but he was unalterable in his decision. He did not dream, however, that the sailors had determined to obtain the coveted drink; that while he was manfully breasting the tempest two of the number had gone into the hold and secured the hidden cask of spirits that was a part of the cargo.

When the relief crew came again on deck, however, he knew the truth. Not a man of them was fit for service. They were reckless and mutinous, and refused to obey orders unless he put for shore.

"Avast, ye lubbers!" yelled the captain, wild with rage at the condition of his men. "Drunk when ye are needed, useless when any minute may send us to Davy Jones' locker! Below, I say, you worthless cattle, or I'll flog you with a belaying pin! We'll carry her through alone, Ben Banks, and iron those lubbers for mutiny at the first port, as sure as my name's Dick Barr! Hear them singing and drinking below, and the ship in peril. They must have reached the hold and got the cask for Panama. Steady! A light ahead!"

"Where away?"

"On the larboard. The shore, too. We are doomed!"

Captain Barr seized an axe and cut loose the rigging overhanging the side of the ship, so that it dropped into the sea.

Then, as a second mass of spars fell to the deck, the shore faded, the lights of the land disappeared, and the schooner flew forward at terrific speed.

The crash of the timbers had brought Professor Ballentine again on deck. He clung to the rail of the hatchway, his face white with anxiety.

"Go below!" shouted the captain. "You can do no good here. Every soul of the crew is drunk, and we are at the mercy of the waves. When Ben Banks drops