

exceedingly palatable when roasted, and were relished with avidity by the hungry boys.

"Young gentlemen," said Professor Ballentine, after dinner was over, "there seems to be no doubt but that we are destined to remain here for some time. My accident places me in a helpless condition, but I do not believe any of you will wantonly cause me anxiety by venturing heedlessly into danger."

"No, no," responded twenty hearty voices.

"I suggest that you proceed to work systematically to better our condition. A place could be made with rocks here for a fire-place, and a protecting hedge built out from the trees."

"Let me attend to that," interrupted Ralph Warden.

"Good. Master Ralph Warden and nine assistants, superintendent of construction. Another party must attend to the commissary department. Harold Gould, you and four aids will attend to this important branch of our domestic economy."

"And you, Ned Darrow, with four trusty comrades, I constitute the exploring corps. You will not venture too far, but for the remainder of the day will endeavour to learn, first, if this is really an island; next, its size and general characteristics."

Ned selected Dick Wilson, Ernest Blake, Eugene Dale, and Sam Pardee to accompany him. They cut some stout, long sticks, and led by Ned set out toward the beach.

"To the west is the ocean, to the north and east evidently the same," remarked Ned. "We want first to learn if water also surrounds us on the south."

"Come, boys, we'll follow the rocks towards the interior, and see what we can discover."

A mile or more inland a deep gap cut through the wall of rock, and down its tortuous length they threaded their way. They managed to climb quite a high cliff, and paused breathless on its summit. The grandeur of the scene was indescribable. The island seemed to be miles in extent, but the blue line of water was apparent on the far southern end.

"An island, sure enough," remarked Ernest Blake. "We're castaways for certain, boys."

"And not a ship in sight," supplemented Dick Wilson, as he scanned the ocean.

"What's that?"

Sam Pardee, as he spoke, pointed to an object about two miles to the southwest near the rockiest portion of the coast.

His companions strained their vision in the direction indicated.

"It's a tree in the rocks," said Ernest.

"No," spoke Ned, slowly, as he shaded his eyes to obtain a better view. "Boys, it's a ship. It's the wreck of the Neptune!"

## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE STRANDED WRECK.

Ned and his companions were very much excited over their discovery, and Ernest Blake was in favour of at once hastening to the spot where the ship was.

"We could not reach it if we did," said Ned. "It lies farther from the shore than it looks."

"But think of it, Ned, we could find enough there to feed us for months."

"Don't do it," cried reckless Dick Wilson. "It's too jolly grubbing for our food as we are."

Ned was silent and thoughtful for some time, and seemed revolving some mighty scheme in his mind.

At last he spoke. "See here, boys," he said, "can you keep a secret?"

"Can we? of course we can," was the reply, in unison.

"Then don't tell any one that we have seen the ship."

"What! not even the Professor?" inquired Ernest, surprised.

"Not even the Professor, because he is not able to aid us in a plan I have in view, and would worry if we tried it alone."

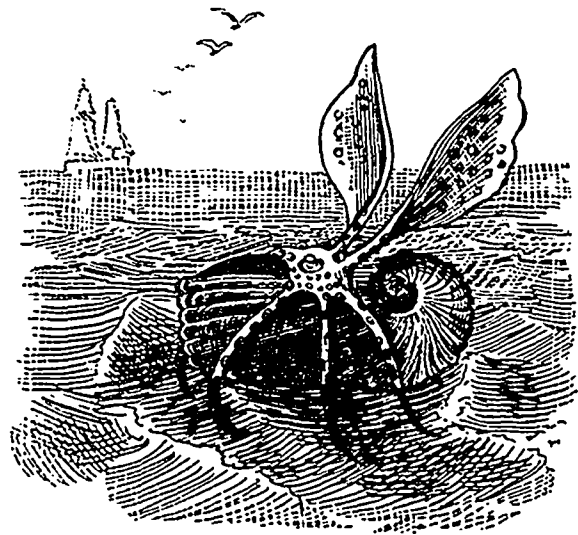
In a few words he detailed his scheme—to secretly visit the wreck in the life-boat that night.

There would be broad moonlight, and they would keep close to the shore. There was no necessity of alarming the Professor, and the result of the trip might be a beneficial one to all concerned.

Ned's comrades pledged implicit secrecy, and when they returned, Ned reported all they had learned except the discovery of the wrecked Neptune.

Before evening he and Ernest Blake strolled inland along the course of the brook. At a spot rarely situated they took minute observations, and decided that no more favourable place for a permanent camp could be found.

At ten o'clock the camp had subsided into silence. It was after he had satisfied himself that all his companions were asleep, that Ned stole cautiously to the side of his four comrades of the day's expedition. He



awakened them gently, and they soon left the blazing camp-fire behind them, and wended their way to the beach.

The moon gilded all the scene with silvery beauty as the five boys pushed off the life-boat. They kept near the shore and rounded their first landing-place, rowing free of rocks, and finally coming in sight of the wreck.

They found the Neptune fast on the rocks and lying on her side, a sad contrast in her shattered appearance to the beautiful schooner that had ploughed the waves so proudly a few days previously.

The after-part of the ship was almost entirely under water. Ned climbed over the submerged rail, and although thoroughly wetted by the operation, pulled himself along until he reached the fore-castle.

His companions, less venturesome, secured the life-boat to the ship, and watched his movements with some anxiety and curiosity.