

"Have you any notion, my lad, why I troubled myself about ye at all?"

Eric shook his head.

"No, sir, unless it's because you have a kinder heart than the others," he replied.

Ben smiled grimly.

"My heart was kinder once than it is now. But I'll tell you how it was. I had a boy of my own once—as trim a lad as ever went aloft, and many a fine trip we had together, for I was an honest man then, and wasn't ashamed to let my boy know my business. Ah! those were good times. We went fishing in the Banks, and there was no schoodner brought home better fares in the run than the trim little *Sea-Slipper*. But I lost my lad. He went out in his dory to fish, and a fog came up, and I never saw him again, though I hunted the Banks for weeks. And after my boy was gone, my luck went too. The fish wouldn't come near me somehow, and times got hard. The wife died. She never held up her head after the day I came home without our boy. I took to the drink. It's been the ruin of better men than me. It brought me here, and the sooner it makes an end of me the better."

Ben stopped as though he could say no more, and Eric, not knowing what to interpose, looked at him in silent sympathy. After a little while, Ben went on:

"You don't look unlike my lad. He was just about your height, and his hair was much the same as yours. He was just a little more than sixteen when I lost him. That's about your age, ain't it?—and when I found you on the beach I hadn't the heart to let you lie there. I knew Evil-Eye would soon come along, and put an end to ye. So I made up my mind to stand by ye, and I'm agoing to keep my word through thick and thin."

Having thus spoken, Ben put his pipe back between his lips, and relapsed into silence.

Eric hardly knew what to say in answer. Sympathy for his protector's sore trials, and gratitude for his assurance of safe-keeping filled his heart. The tears streamed down his cheeks, and his voice trembled so that his words were hardly intelligible as turning to Ben, he laid his hand upon the latter's knee, and looking up into his face, said:

"You've been very good to me, Ben. You're the only friend I've got here, except Prince, and I'm sure you won't let any harm come to me if you can help it. And I'm so sorry about your son. You see we've both lost somebody. You've lost your boy, and I—I've lost my—" but he could not go on. His feelings overcame him, and burying his face in his hands he burst into a wild passion of tears.

Ben said not a word, though a suspicious glistening at his eye-lids, and the quite unnecessary vigor of his puffing told plainly enough that he was far from being unmoved. When Eric's emotion seemed to have spent itself, he quietly rose, knocked the ashes out of his pipe, stuffed it into his pocket, and saying gently:

"Come, lad, let us go back to the hut," lifted his companion to his feet, and the two slowly retraced their steps to the wreckers' abode.

Alive though he was to the dangers surrounding him, yet Eric now felt more at ease in his mind than he had done since the ship-

wreck. With such protectors as Ben and Prince he surely had not much to fear, even in the evil company to which he was doomed. And as to the future—it certainly did seem dark. But he had been taught to trust in the God to whom he daily prayed, and he could not believe that, orphaned as he was, the Father of the fatherless would desert him utterly. Evil-Eye was his chief source of dread. He seemed scarcely human, and Eric rightly esteemed him capable of any villainy that suited his purpose. As for the other wreckers they seemed so indifferent to his presence that he gave himself no concern about them. But Evil-Eye was an ever-present menace.

In the days that followed, Eric could not help being conscious of the frequency with which that one awful orb was turned upon him, and of the hungering hyena-like look with which it steadily

regarded him. But evidently there was a restraining influence which kept that blood-curdling look from finding its way into appropriate deed. Though recognizing no leader,—their motto being each man for himself, and one as good as another—it was plain that the wreckers regarded Ben with a respect they paid to no other member of their motley crew. Had they seen fit to choose a leader he would assuredly have been their selection. This was in part due to his great size and strength, for he towered above them all, and in part to his taciturn ways, which prevented any of that familiarity that so quickly breeds contempt. Evil-Eye feared him as much as he hated him, and dared not openly assail him, though the fire of his fury burned at white heat within. In his fear of Ben lay Eric's safety, and this defence was ere long strengthened in another way both strange and

