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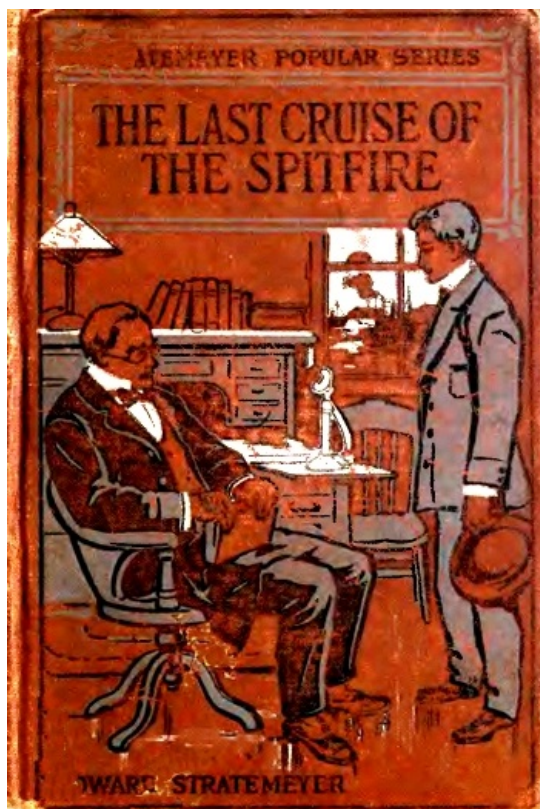
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE LAST CRUISE OF THE SPITFIRE; OR, LUKE FOSTER'S STRANGE VOYAGE ***



THE LAST CRUISE OF THE SPITFIRE

OR *Luke Foster's Strange Voyage*

BY EDWARD STRATEMEYER

AUTHOR OF "UNDER DEWEY AT MANILA," "A YOUNG VOLUNTEER IN CUBA" "FIGHTING IN CUBAN WATERS," "RICHARD DARE'S VENTURE" "REUBEN STONE'S DISCOVERY," "OLIVER BRIGHT'S SEARCH" ETC., ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

BOSTON

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MY WAKENING WAS A RUDE ONE.

PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION.

"THE LAST CRUISE OF THE SPITFIRE" is the opening volume of the "Ship and Shore" Series, and tells of the things which happened to a boy who ran away from his guardian's home because he could no longer stand the cruel treatment received.

In this tale, in order to get close to the heart of the boy, the author has allowed Luke Foster to tell his own story in his own way. Luke has never before been to sea, and when he is carried off on the "Spitfire" his real experiences on the briny ocean, set up in juxtaposition to what he had imagined a life on the "rolling deep" to be, make reading which I trust every lad who has a "hankering" after a sailor's life may digest with profit. Luke concludes that a life on land is good enough for him, and I feel certain that a majority of our readers will agree with him.

Of Luke's overbearing cousin and his dishonest uncle much might be said which Luke leaves untold. The boy does this probably out of his natural good-heartedness. Yet the lives of the pair, and especially that of the father, well illustrate the old saying, that, sooner or later, every wrong-doer is bound to overreach himself and fall into the hands of justice.

Upon first appearing in print, "The Last Cruise of the Spitfire" was as well received as the stories in the "Bound to Succeed Series," which had preceded it; and once again the author begs to thank readers and critics for their continued kindness to him.

EDWARD STRATEMEYER.

NEWARK, N.J.,

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THE LAST CRUISE OF THE SPITFIRE; OR, LUKE FOSTER'S STRANGE VOYAGE.

CHAPTER I.

MYSELF AND MY UNCLE.

"Luke!"

"Yes, Mr. Stillwell."

"Why didn't you sweep and dust the office this morning?"

"I did, sir."

"You did!"

"Yes, sir."

"You did!" repeated the gentleman, who, I may as well state, was my esteemed uncle. "I must say, young man, that lately you have falsified to an astonishing degree."

"Excuse me, but I have not falsified—not to my knowledge, sir."

"Stop; don't contradict me——"

"I am telling the truth, sir."

"Stop, I tell you! I will not have it! Look here, and then dare to tell me that this office has seen the touch of a broom or duster this day!"

And my Uncle Felix motioned me majestically into his office with one hand, while with the other he pointed in bitter scorn at the floor.

Mr. Felix Stillwell was in a bad humor. His sarcastic tones told this quite as well as the sour look upon his face. Evidently some business matters had gone wrong, and he intended to vent the spleen raised thereby upon me. He was a high-strung man at the best, and when anything went wrong the first person in his way was sure to catch the full benefit of his ire.

I was an orphan, and had lived with my Uncle Felix three years. Previous to that time I was a scholar at the Hargrove Military and Commercial Academy, a first class training-school for boys, situated upon the Palisades, overlooking the Hudson River.

My father was a retired lawyer, who, being in ill health, went with my mother on a two years' trip to Europe. They journeyed from place to place for sixteen months, and then lost their lives in a terrible railway accident in England. The death of both my parents at once was a fearful blow to me, and for a long while I could not think, and was utterly unable to judge what was taking place around me. At the end of three months I was informed that Mr. Stillwell had been appointed my guardian, and then I was taken from school and placed in his office in New York City.

My duties at the office of Stillwell, Grinder & Co. were varied. In the morning I was expected to clean everything as bright as a pin. Then I went to the post-office, and on a dozen other errands; after which I did such writing as was placed in my hands.

For this work I was allowed my board, clothing and fifty cents a week spending money—not a large sum, but one with which I would have been content had other things been equal.

But they were far from being so. I lived with my uncle, but I was not treated as one of the family. His wife—I do not care to call her my aunt—was a very proud woman who had come from a blue-blooded Boston family, and she hardly deigned to notice me. When she did it was in a patronizing manner, as if I was a menial far beneath her.

My two cousins, Lillian and Augustus, were even less civil. Lillian, who was a fashionable miss of seventeen, never spoke to me excepting when she wanted something done, and Gus, as every one called him, thought it his right to order me around as if I was his valet.

In the matter of food and clothing I was scarcely considered. Any of Gus's cast-off suits were thought good enough for the office, and my Sunday suit was two years old. I had my breakfast with the servants before the others were up, took my noon lunch with me, and dinner when I returned from the office, which was generally two hours after Mr. Stillwell, when everything was cold.

Looking back at those times I often wonder how it was I stood the treatment as long as I did. During my parents' lives I had had nearly everything that my heart wished, and to be thus cut short, not only in my bodily wants, but also in consideration and affection, was hard indeed.

To my mind there was no reason why I should be treated as one so far beneath the family. My mother had been a gentlewoman and my father a gentleman, and I was conceited enough to think that by both breeding and education I was fully the equal of my cousins. Besides, my father had been well-to-do, and had, no doubt, left me a fair inheritance.

Had I had less to do I would have been lonely in a city where I hardly knew a soul. But my work kept me so busy I had no time to think of myself, and perhaps this is one reason why I did not rebel before I did.

In the whole of the metropolis there was but one person whom I considered a friend. That was Mr. Ira Mason, who had his law offices in the same building with Stillwell, Grinder & Co. I had done a number of errands for this gentleman, and in return he had become interested in me.

To Mr. Mason I confided my story in all its details, and when I had finished he told me that if matters did not mend, or got worse, to let him know, and he would see what could be done for me.

My uncle did not like Mr. Mason, who, on several occasions, had had clients who wished to obtain patents, and whom he had taken elsewhere; the reason given being that Stillwell, Grinder & Co.'s rates were too high, though their peculiar methods of getting patents had much to do with it.

It was the morning of my seventeenth birthday. I had requested my uncle, several days previous,

to give me a holiday, which I intended to spend with an old school chum of mine, Harry Banker, at his home in Locustville, a pretty village, fifty miles northwest of the city.

The Banker family and mine had been well acquainted, and I had received numerous invitations from them to spend some time at their home, a large farm; but was each time forced to decline.

When I had requested my uncle to let me go for just one day, I had thought it would be impossible for him to refuse, as it was the middle of July, and business was dull. I had saved my money for some time, determined to be prepared to pay my own way if he should not give me the price of a ticket.

My request for a day off was met with a sharp refusal. It wasn't necessary, there was work to do, and, besides, Gus was going to take the day to go to Coney Island, and I must attend to his desk during his absence.

I was taken back by the curt negative that I received, and was inclined to "air my mind." I had had no holiday for two years, and was clearly entitled to one. Gus had had a week at Christmas, and half a dozen days since. It was not treating me fairly to pile up the work upon me, and give me no breathing spells.

What made me feel worse was the fact that I had written to Harry telling him of my expectations, so that I might find him home, and we could have a good time. He would surely expect me, and it was doubtful if I could get him word in time telling him I could not come.

On the evening before I had written him a letter and posted it. Gus had seen me do so, and had made a mean remark concerning the fact that I was to stay at home while he was to have a good time.

The remark was entirely uncalled for, and it made me angry. Hot words passed; and he was on the point of hitting me when my uncle came in and stopped the row. But my cousin was fearfully angry still, and vowed to get even with me; and I knew he would try his best to do so.

On arriving at the offices that morning, I was in no bright humor. But I knew sulking would accomplish nothing, and so set to with a will to clean up as usual. This job took fully half an hour, and when it was done I crossed over to Mr. Mason's office to return a book he had loaned me, and also to obtain another from his large library.

While in the office I heard footsteps in the hall, and looking through the partly closed door had seen Gus enter his father's private office, closing the door after him. I was on the point of following, when I remembered what had passed between us, and so waited until some member of the firm might appear.

Fully five minutes elapsed, and then my cousin came out, closing the door softly behind him. He paused for a moment in the hallway, and, seeing no one, hurried down the stairs, and out of the building.

I thought nothing more of his movements, but continued to look over the books, Mr. Mason meanwhile being busy at his desk in a smaller office beyond. Presently I heard my uncle's well-known step, and hurried out, meeting him just after he had been in his private office, which was behind all the others.

"Don't think that because it is your birthday you can neglect your work," he went on, in a rising voice. "This office is to be cleaned thoroughly every morning."

"I cleaned it thoroughly not half an hour ago," I replied stoutly.

"Do you mean to contradict me?" he cried.

"I'm telling the truth," was all I could say.

"Does that look like it?"

The floor certainly did not look like it. Bits of paper were strewn in all directions, and the bottle of ink on the desk had been upset, creating a small blue-black river, running diagonally over the oil-cloth towards the safe that stood beside the window.

Of course I knew at once who had done all this. Gus had vowed to get square with me, and this was his method of doing so. Yet I could not help but wonder what the outcome would be.

"I say, does that floor look like it?" repeated Mr. Stillwell, in gathering wrath.

"I didn't do this, Uncle Felix."

"You didn't?" he sneered. "Well, who did, then? We haven't any cat to do it."

I was on the point of saying it was a two-legged cat, but thinking he would not relish the joke, replied:

"I don't know. Gus was here."

"My son? Impossible! I left him at home half an hour ago."

"He was here not ten minutes since," I said.

"I don't believe it! Besides, why should he make a pig-pen of the office, answer me that?" stormed Uncle Felix.

"Because he knew I had just cleaned it up, and he wanted to get even with me for that row we had yesterday."

"A likely story, I must say! As if Augustus wasn't beyond such childishness! You did this yourself. I want you to clean it up at once."

"I didn't do——" I began.

"Not another word! Clean it up, I say."

My uncle was in such a savage humor I knew it would be useless for me to attempt to reason with him. So getting a sponge and some water, I began to clean up the muss on the desk. I had hardly cleaned the writing-pad when my uncle stopped me.

"If you are going to take all day, do the job when you come back from the post-office. I want some letters to go in the nine o'clock mail. Here they are."

He shoved the letters into my hand.

"Now don't get them all dirty!" he cried, "or I'll crack you over the head. Be off with you."

In a moment I was on my way to the post-office, three blocks distant.

CHAPTER II.

AN UNEXPECTED LETTER.

As I walked along the street I could not help but ponder over the way I had been treated. My uncle's manner towards me was getting harsher every day. If it kept up in this fashion soon the time would come when human nature could stand it no longer.

And what was I to do then? Several times I had asked myself that question without being able to come to a satisfactory answer. It was easy enough to think of running away and so forth, but this was just the thing I did not wish to do. My uncle was my guardian, and he was bound to support me. To be sure, the support he gave me was merely a nominal one; but I was not versed in law, and was afraid if I went off he might keep my inheritance from me. I did not know how much money my father had left, but what there was I wanted to come to me.

Gus's actions puzzled me. If he was bound for a day to Coney Island what had brought him to the office at such an early hour of the morning? I knew that he disliked early rising, and was pretty well satisfied that even the delight of paying me off would not have induced him to leave his soft bed.

Arriving at the post-office, I posted Mr. Stillwell's letters, and then opened the box containing the letters for the firm. There were quite a handful, and I looked at the addresses to see that no mistakes had been made.

In an instant one of them attracted my attention.

It was directed as follows:

MR. LUKE FOSTER,
Care of Stillwell, Grinder & Co.,
PATENT AGENTS,
NEW YORK CITY.

The letter was addressed to me, and as it was the first foreign epistle I had received since my parents' death, I looked at it with considerable curiosity. It was postmarked London, and the handwriting was cramped and heavy.

Tearing the letter open, I was still more astonished to read the following lines:

"MR. LUKE FOSTER,

"DEAR SIR:

"Of course you will be astonished to receive this, I being a stranger to you. But just before his death I became well acquainted with your father, he spending with your mother six weeks at my country residence in Northampton. We met six years ago in New York, and traveled from that city to Chicago, and from there to St. Louis; so you will see that we became quite intimate.

"While stopping at my house your father expressed the fear that should he die suddenly

while on his travels, and his wife also (odd, indeed, when such proved to be the case), your future might be an uncertain one. He said he had made a will, appointing his friend, John W. Banker of Locustville, New York State, to be your guardian, but was afraid you might not like the choice, or that this man might not treat you well.

"Never expecting that your father's end was near, I laughingly replied that I was sure he had done for the best. But he shook his head in doubt, and said men were strange, and often acted in a way least expected, which is certainly true. So I agreed, should anything happen to him, to keep an eye on you. I have not done so for the following reason:

"Following close upon your parents' death came the demise of my mother in Paris, and a week later, the failure of a banking house in South America, with which I was closely connected. After the funeral of my mother I took passage for Rio de Janeiro, and it was about two weeks ago that I set foot in England. Since then I have been exceedingly busy straightening out my affairs, and this is the first chance I have had of addressing you.

"I trust your father's choice of a guardian has been a happy one, and that you are doing well. If not, write me immediately, and I will see what can be done. I send this letter in care of your uncle because I have not had your address. I know that he and your father were not on good terms, but I trust you no longer carry on that quarrel.

"Very truly,

"Your friend,

"HARVEY NOTTINGTON.

"43 OLD FELLOWS ROAD."

Standing by one of the deep windows of the post-office, I read the letter through twice. It will be needless for me to state that it impressed me strangely.

The most important statement made by the writer was that my father had never intended my uncle to be my guardian. I knew of the family quarrel, but Mr. Stillwell, when he had taken me from the academy, had assured me that that was all past and gone, and I had been delighted to have it so, for it had always pained me to see my mother not on speaking terms with my aunt. But apparently my uncle had not told the truth, and for reasons of his own.

How was it that Mr. Stillwell had been appointed my guardian when my father wished Mr. Banker to act in that capacity? This was a question that worried me not a little. I liked Harry's father very much, and was sure he would have treated me with far more consideration than I was now receiving.

The perusal of the letter drove all thoughts of the unpleasant scene I had left behind from my mind, and I was on the point of going directly to my uncle for an explanation of the case. But then came the recollection of Mr. Stillwell's manner towards me, and I shoved the letter into my pocket, resolved to say nothing until I had thought the matter over.

I walked back to the office slowly, for I was in deep thought. For two years my uncle had been my guardian, and during that time my life had been little better than a continual hardship. The letter brought up the memory of the past, and I realized now more than ever how happy the days gone by had been. What had brought about the change?

Clearly, the way I was being treated. Mr. Stillwell cared nothing for me, body or soul. Indeed, at that moment I was inclined to think that he would be as well satisfied to see me dead as alive. Perhaps if I were dead he would inherit the money left me by my father.

This thought had never occurred to me before, and I gave it considerable attention. When I came to review the whole matter I discovered that in reality I knew very little of my own affairs. I had taken many things for granted, and my uncle's word on all occasions. Whether this was for the best was still to be seen.

I was glad I had not gone on a visit that day. Had I done so Mr. Stillwell would have received my letter, and I do not doubt but that he would have opened it. As it was, he knew nothing of the communication, and I did not intend that he should until I was ready to disclose it to him.

By the stamp upon the letter sheet, I saw that Mr. Nottingham was a solicitor, and this made my mind revert to Mr. Ira Mason. As I have said, the lawyer had taken an interest in me, and I was sure he would now give me the best advice in his power.

I was sorry I could not go to the gentleman at once. The letter had fired my curiosity, and I wanted to get at the bottom of the affair.

But I had already lost time: to lose more would raise a storm of anger against me. I determined to wait until the noon hour, or after my uncle had gone home.

The firm of patent lawyers of which my uncle was senior partner was composed of himself, Mr. Grinder, a short, stumpy busybody, now away to Washington on business, and Mr. Canning, a young man who had been but recently taken in, not so much because he was needed, I fancied, as

because he brought with him plenty of money and a good business connection.

Mr. Canning did not come to business until very late, as he lived twenty-five miles out of the city, in New Jersey. There were no clerks but Gus and myself; so when I arrived at the office I found Mr. Stillwell still alone.

My uncle's face was as dark as a thunder-cloud when I handed him the letters. I made up my mind he was about to lecture me for having taken my time, and I braced up to withstand the shower of strong language he would be sure to heap upon me.

"So, young man, you've got back at last!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, sir."

"Been rather a long while."

To this I made no reply. What was there to say?

"It's a wonder you came back at all," he went on. "To be honest, I never expected to see you again."

"I'm sorry I can't please you, Uncle Felix."

"Don't Uncle Felix me!" he cried savagely. "After your dirty work to-day I don't want to be any relation to you."

This was certainly putting it rather strongly.

"Whether you believe it or not, I didn't muss up the office," I said firmly. "Gus did that."

"I left Gus at home," he cried, even more emphatically than before, and I could see that he was really angry because of my having dragged his son's name into the dispute.

"Gus was here, and left just before you came."

"I don't believe it."

"All the same, it is true."

"It's only a story to pass your crimes off on my son. But it won't wash, Luke, it won't wash."

I made no further reply, seeing it was useless to try to reason with him, but hung up my hat and turned my attention to cleaning up the floor.

CHAPTER III.

SOMEBODY'S CRIME.

While engaged in tidying up the office I noticed for the first time that the door of the safe stood open. This was a most unusual thing, and I wondered if my uncle had taken something out and forgotten to close it. He was a very careful man, and if he had it was the first time I had known him to do such a thing.

"The safe door is open," I said mildly, as he moved as if to leave the office.

"Have you just found that out?" he sneered; and then I saw that he had gone over to the door of the office only to close it.

"Was it open before?" I asked in some alarm.

He looked at me for a moment in silence, the cloud upon his brow deepening.

"Luke, you are a mighty cool one for a boy, but I've got you fast, so you might as well give in," he said finally. "Come, now, I want no nonsense."

This unexpected speech only bewildered me.

"I don't understand you, Uncle Felix."

"How many times must I tell you that I am no longer your uncle?" he stormed. "From this time I am done with you."

"What have I done?"

"What have you done? What haven't you done? Ruined your good name forever!"

"I didn't muss up——"

"Oh, pshaw, give the floor and the office a rest! I want you to own up without further words."

By this time I was more bewildered than ever. What in the world was my uncle driving at?

"What do you want me to own up to?" I asked.

"You know well enough."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do."

"I don't."

"I'll give you five minutes to make a full confession," he cried, in a perfect rage. "At the end of that time if you are still obdurate I will hand you over to the police."

This was certainly alarming news. Surely something serious had happened.

"If you will tell me what the trouble is, I'll try to answer your question," was all I could find to say.

Again he looked at me in that hard, cold manner.

"I want you to tell me," he said, with great deliberation, "I want you to tell me instantly what you have done with the six thousand dollars and the papers that were in the safe."

I stood amazed. For a moment I hardly realized the meaning of the words that had been spoken.

"The six thousand dollars that were in the safe!" I gasped.

"Exactly."

"I don't know anything about the money. I didn't know you had six thousand in the place."

"Yes, you did. You saw me place it in the safe yesterday afternoon."

"No, sir, I did not."

"You did: and you took it out either last night or this morning. Come, tell me what you have done with it, or, as sure my name is Felix Stillwell, you shall pass the remainder of this day in prison. Luke, I am not to be trifled with!"

My uncle was fearfully in earnest, and his thin hands trembled with excitement when he spoke. In spite of the fact that I was a pretty stout young fellow, I was glad that though he had closed the door leading to the outer office, he had been unable to lock it. It might come so far that I would be glad enough to escape from his presence.

"Did you hear me?" he demanded, seeing that I made no immediate reply.

I was busy thinking over the strange news he had announced. Six thousand dollars and some papers missing from the safe! Whoever had taken them had made a big haul.

I could not help but think of Gus. He was the only one who had been in the office besides myself. Was it possible the young man had robbed his own father?

I was loath to believe that such was the case. My cousin a thief! It could not be possible; and yet if he had not taken the money, who had?

"Do you hear me?" demanded Mr. Stillwell again.

"I hear you," I replied, as calmly as I could, though I was nearly as excited as he was.

"What did you do with the money?"

"I don't know anything about the money."

My uncle made a threatening gesture.

"It's the truth, whether you believe it or not," I went on. "I did not know you had the money, and I haven't been near the safe."

"Luke Foster, do you realize that you are staring the State prison in the face?"

"I can't help that. I know nothing of your money, and that's all there is to it."

"When did you open the office this morning?"

"Quarter to seven."

"Did you clean up at once?"

"Yes, sir."

"When you cleaned up was the safe door open?"

"No, sir. It might have been unlocked, but it wasn't open."

"How long did it take you to clean up?"

"About half an hour."

"What did you do then?"

"I went to Mr. Mason's office to return a book he had loaned me."

"And then?"

"When I came back I met you," I replied promptly.

"And you mean to say the safe was robbed in the meantime. Luke, you cannot make me believe that."

"I don't know when the safe was robbed. I told you what I did, that was all."

"I don't believe a word of your story! You have robbed the safe, and you have the money."

"If you think so you can search me," I replied promptly.

But even as I spoke I thought of the strange letter I had received. What would my uncle say if he saw it? It seemed to me I was getting into hot water in more ways than one.

"I shall search you, never fear," said Mr. Stillwell. "But you had better confess. It may go easier with you if you do."

"I can't confess to something I'm not guilty of," I returned. And then, as I thought of how I had been treated, I cried out:

"You had better look nearer home for the guilty party, Uncle Felix."

My reply seemed to anger him beyond all endurance.

"Don't you dare to insinuate my son is a thief!" he cried. "You low-bred upstart! I have half a mind to hand you over to the police at once!"

And with his face full of passion Uncle Felix bore down upon me, as if ready to crush me beneath the iron heel of his wrath once and forever.

CHAPTER IV.

AN UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL.

Mr. Stillwell's anger had reached a white heat, and as he strode towards me, I was half inclined to think he intended to take my very life. He was naturally a passionate man, and the insinuation I had made concerning his son maddened him beyond all endurance.

I could readily understand why this was so. My Uncle Felix almost worshiped his son, and to have any one insinuate that that son was a thief cut him to the heart. I believe he would rather have lost the six thousand dollars, greatly as he might have felt the loss, than to have imagined that Gus was the guilty party.

"My son a thief!" he repeated hotly. "How dare you?"

"Gus was the only one in the office besides myself," I replied.

"And that is the reason you lay the crime at his door? I don't believe a word you say."

I did not expect that he would. Gus was a favored son, while I was but an orphan with no one to stand up for me.

"Are you going to tell me what you have done with the money and the papers?" he demanded.

"How can I when I don't know anything of them?"

"You do know."

"I don't."

I hardly had the words out when my uncle grasped me roughly by the coat collar.

"I'll teach you a lesson, you young rascal!"

"Let go of me, Uncle Felix!" I cried. "Let go, or I'll—I'll—"

"What will you do?" he sneered.

"Never mind; only you may be sorry if you don't."

His only reply was to tighten his hand upon my collar in such a way that I was in immediate danger of being strangled.

"I'll choke you to death, if you don't tell!" he cried. "Speak up instantly."

"I don't know."

His hand tightened.

"Will you tell?"

I did not reply. I saw that he meant what he said, and I was busy trying to think how to defend myself.

When Mr. Stillwell had caught me I had backed up against the desk. Near me lay a heavy ruler, used by Mr. Grinder in preparing designs for patents. I picked up the ruler, and before my assailant was aware struck him a violent blow upon the wrist.

The brass edge of the weapon I had used made a slight cut upon my uncle's arm, and with a cry more of alarm than pain he dropped his hold of me and turned his attention to the injury.

Seeing this I quickly placed a large office chair near the door, and got behind it, in such a manner that I could escape at an instant's warning.

"You young villain! Do you mean to add murder to your other crimes?" he howled, as he proceeded to bind his handkerchief around his wrist.

"I mean to fight my own battles," I replied. "I won't let you or any other man choke me to death."

"You shall suffer for all you have done!"

"I'm willing to take the consequences," I replied, as coolly as I could.

He continued to glare at me, but for a moment made no movement, probably because he knew not what to do next. I watched him very much as a mouse may watch a cat.

"Come, Luke, you can't keep this up any longer. Hand over that money and the papers."

"Let me tell you for the last time, Mr. Stillwell, that I know nothing of either," said I. "If any one has them that person is your son."

"Don't tell me such a yarn!"

"I believe it's the truth. If not, why did Gus steal into the office and out again in such a hurry this morning?"

"I don't believe he was here. I left him in his room at home."

"Are you sure he was in his room?"

"Yes, for I called him, and he answered back."

"Nevertheless he was here, and maybe I can prove it."

My uncle bit his lip. He did not relish my last remark.

"And even if he was here he did not know the combination of the safe."

"Neither did I."

"But you could have found it out. You had plenty of chances."

"No more chances than Gus had."

"Pooh! Don't tell me that!"

"It's the truth."

"My son is not on a level with you."

"I always considered myself as good as he is," I returned warmly.

"My son is not a thief."

"Neither am I, Uncle Felix; and what is more, I won't let you or any other man say so," I declared.

"What are you going to do about it?" he asked curiously.

"I won't stand it, that's all."

"Do you know that I intend to have you arrested if you don't return what you have stolen?"

"If you have me arrested I will do all I can to defend myself," was my answer. "If I am brought before the judge perhaps I will have one or two things to say that you will not relish."

"What do you mean?"

"There will be time enough to speak when I am brought into court."

"You think you are smart, Luke, but you are nothing but a fool. What can you say against me?"

"A good many things that you don't dream of. You are not treating me rightly, and you know it. You don't give me decent clothing to wear, and I have to work harder than any one in the office. I am sure my father never intended such a future for his son."

"I don't care what you father intended!" he snarled.

"But I do, and what is more, I intend, sooner or later, to try to have matters mended. My father always told me he wished me to keep on going to school and then to enter Princeton."

"Never mind, I am your guardian now, and I know what is best for you."

"How much money did my father leave me?" I asked, with considerable curiosity.

"None of your business."

"Oh, but it *is* my business."

"It is not your business, and I want you to shut up!" he cried, in a rage. "He left little enough."

"Little enough," I cried. "My father was rich."

"He was at one time; but he lost the most of his fortune in stocks just before he died. You have hardly enough to keep you until you are twenty-one."

I must confess that my uncle's remarks were quite a shock to me. I had always supposed that I would some day be wealthy. I gave the matter a moment's thought, and then came to the conclusion that Mr. Stillwell was not telling the truth.

"How much money did my father leave?" I repeated. "I am entitled to know."

"You will know when I get ready to tell you, not before."

"Perhaps you are mistaken," said I. "And another thing, Uncle Felix, how is it that you were appointed my guardian?"

At these words I fancied my uncle turned pale. He sprang towards me, then stopped short.

"What do you mean by that question?" he demanded.

"I mean why were you made my guardian when my father and you were not on good terms?"

"Pooh, that quarrel was of no consequence," was the lofty reply. "Your father could not find a better person in which to trust his son's care."

I had my own opinion on that point, but did not find it fit to say so. Then I put in what I thought was a master stroke.

"I thought Mr. Banker was to be my guardian."

At these words Mr. Stillwell turned even paler than before, and his hand trembled as he pointed his long finger at me in a threatening manner.

"You think too much!" he growled.

"Are you going to answer that question?"

"What put it into your head?"

"Never mind."

"Has John Banker been writing to you about it?"

In spite of his effort to ask the question unconcernedly I could see that my uncle was tremendously interested. Like a flash it came over me that perhaps this was one of the reasons he did not wish me to spend any time at Harry Banker's home. Mr. Banker might take it into his head to ask me how I was being treated, and that might lead to trouble.

"Never mind; but I'm going to find out before long."

"And you are going to prison before long, unless you hand over what you took from the safe."

"I am not afraid of you, Mr. Stillwell. I have always done right. But I'm going to know something about myself, and soon. I have a letter in my pocket that tells me that Mr. Banker was to be my guardian, and I'm going to know why he is not."

Mr. Stillwell glared at me. If he could have eaten me up I believe he would have done so.

"You have a letter?" he cried hoarsely. "Who from?"

"That is my business."

"And I'll make it mine. Hand it over this instant!"

"Not much."

"I say you will."

"And I say no."

I was sorry I had spoken of the letter. I could readily see that it had worked Mr. Stillwell up to a fever heat.

"Give me that letter, Luke. I'll stand no more fooling."

Once more my uncle bore down upon me. But I saw him coming, and shoved the chair in his way.

I still held the ruler in my hand, and now brandished it over my head.

"Don't come any closer!" I cried. "If you do I'll crack you on the head!"

My uncle was too enraged to pay attention to my words. He hurled the chair aside and sprang upon me as a wild beast springs upon its prey.

"We'll see who is master!" he panted.

In another instant he had me by the throat. His grasp was that of a band of steel, and I thought for a surety my last hour had come.

"Let—let go!" I gasped.

"Will you give me the letter?"

My only reply was to struggle with all my strength. In a moment we were both on the floor.

"Help! Help!" I cried.

"Shut up!" he exclaimed, and tried to close my mouth with his hand.

"I won't shut up! Let me up! Help!"

But now my voice was fainter. It was all I could do to get my breath. The room swam round and round before my eyes.

"Give up that letter and the money and papers you took!"

"Help! Help!—"

I could cry no longer. My senses were fast leaving me. Would no one come to my assistance?

"We'll see who is master! If you don't give—"

My uncle did not finish his speech, for at that instant the door was flung open, and a tall, powerful man stood in the doorway.

"Here! let up there!" he commanded. "What are you doing, Stillwell? Who's that on the floor? Great buckwheat, if it ain't Luke Foster!"

I listened in amazement as well as delight. The newcomer was Mr. John Banker!

CHAPTER V.

AN APPALLING PROSPECT.

Never was an arrival more opportune than when Mr. John Banker stepped into the private office. I fully believe had he come a moment later he would have found me insensible. As it was it took me several seconds to recover my breath.

"John Banker!" ejaculated my uncle, and every line of his features told of his discomfiture.

"What are you doing with Luke?" went on Harry's father. "Let him up."

"None of your business!" growled my uncle.

"I think it is. Luke, get up."

By this time I had somewhat recovered, and I was not slow to obey the command. I arose to my feet, and took my place beside my newly-arrived friend.

"What's it all about?" went on Mr. Banker, turning to me.

"He says I robbed the safe of six thousand dollars," I replied.

"And so he did," put in my uncle, glad to be able to speak a word for himself.

"Six thousand dollars!" ejaculated Mr. Banker. "Phew! but that's a large sum!"

"I know nothing of the money," I went on. "But I think his son took it, and I just told him so, and that made him mad."

"My son is no thief," stormed Mr. Stillwell.

"And neither is Robert Foster's son, I reckon," returned my friend. "I've knowed Luke all my life, and he's as straightforward a lad as one wants to meet. There's some mistake, Mr. Stillwell."

"No mistake at all; and unless the boy gives up what he took he shall go to prison."

"No, no; don't be too harsh!" cried Mr. Banker. "Remember he is your nephew."

"He is no longer any relation of mine! I've cast him off."

"You have, have you?" asked my friend, curiously.

"Yes, I have."

"Maybe you haven't any right to do it," went on Mr. Banker. "You've got his money in trust."

"Precious little of it."

"Yes? I reckon Robert Foster left quite a pile."

"No such thing."

"He was worth fifty or sixty thousand dollars."

"Fifty or sixty thousand dollars!" howled Mr. Stillwell. "It isn't quarter of that sum. He left five thousand dollars, and that's all."

"Nonsense, Stillwell, he left more."

"Who knows best, you or I?"

"Never mind; you can't make me believe Luke's father wasn't better off than that."

My uncle pursed up his lips.

"But that isn't here nor there," he said. "Luke has taken the money, and he's got to go to prison."

A look of pain crossed Mr. Banker's face. He and my father had been warm friends, and I well knew that he would do all in his power for me.

"He won't go to prison if I can help it," he said. "Luke, tell me the whole story."

Despite the numerous interruptions from my uncle, I related the particulars of the case. Mr. Banker listened with close attention.

"That sounds like a straight story," he said, when I had concluded. "I can't see but what your son is just as much under suspicion as Luke, Stillwell."

"You don't know anything about it, Banker, and the less you have to do with the matter the better off you will be."

"I'm going to see Luke through."

"What brought you here?"

"I came to take him along with me, if he hadn't gone yet. Harry said he expected him up to spend the day or maybe a week, and I happened to be in the city since yesterday."

"He wouldn't leave me off," I put in. "He hasn't let me have a holiday since I've been here."

"Humph! seems to me you're rather hard on the lad, Stillwell, in more ways than one."

"It's none of your business. You had better leave us alone."

"As I've said before, I intend to see Luke through. Don't be alarmed, my lad. If you've done right all will go well with you."

"Thank you, Mr. Banker. I need a friend. Mr. Stillwell doesn't give me half a show."

"You shall have all the show you need after this, Luke."

My uncle was in a rage, but he did not know what to do. Now that I had some one to stand by me, I no longer felt the alarm I had when alone.

"For the last time, are you going to give up the money?" asked Mr. Stillwell.

"I've already answered that question," was my reply.

"Then you shall go to prison. Come along with me."

He made a movement as if to take me by the arm, but Mr. Banker stopped him.

"Not so fast, Stillwell. Where do you intend to take him?"

"To the station house, where he belongs."

This alarmed me.

"Can he do it?" I asked. "I didn't take the money."

Mr. Banker's face clouded.

"I am afraid he can. But don't be alarmed. I will stand by you."

But the prospect before me of spending even a short while in one of the city station houses, previous to an examination, was not a pleasant one. I had known one young clerk who had done so, and was ever afterwards spoken of as having been to prison under suspicion.

"I won't go to prison," I cried. "He has no right to send me. Why doesn't he send Gus, too?"

"You come along," said my uncle sternly. "Didn't I tell you we would find out who was master?"

He took hold of my arm. As he did so Mr. Canning came bustling in.

"Hello, what's up?" he exclaimed.

My uncle told his story. The new partner listened incredulously.

"I can hardly believe it possible!" he exclaimed. "Yet many things are queer here, he added," with a peculiar look that made my uncle wince.

"And I'm going to make an example of him," went on my uncle. "Take charge of the office while I take the young rascal down to the police station."

"I will take charge of the office, but don't act hastily," replied Mr. Canning.

"Now come along," went on Mr. Stillwell to me. "And beware how you conduct yourself."

"I shall go along," said Mr. Banker.

Taking me by the arm, my uncle led the way down the stairs. Mr. Banker was close at my side.

CHAPTER VI.

A TURN OF FORTUNE.

It was now almost nine o'clock, and Nassau Street, where the patent offices of Stillwell, Grinder & Co. were situated, was crowded with people. My uncle made such a show of what he was doing that it was not long before quite a crowd was following us, all anxious to know what had happened.

"There is no use of your making such a show of the poor boy," said Mr. Banker. "You act as if he had murdered some one."

"Mind your own business," snarled Mr. Stillwell.

Mr. Banker was an upright farmer, and there was little of natural meekness in his nature. He resented my uncle's speech, and quite an altercation took place.

While the two were talking I was doing some hard thinking. The idea of going to prison became every moment more odious to me. I could fancy myself in a dark, damp cell, surrounded by criminals of every degree, awaiting a hearing. What would my friends think? And if the affair once got into the newspapers my good name would be gone forever.

The more I thought of the matter the more determined I became that I would not go to prison. Suppose I ran away?

No sooner had this foolish thought entered my mind than I prepared to act upon it. We were now on the corner of Fulton Street, and to cross here was all but impossible. My uncle and Mr. Banker were still in hot dispute, and for an instant neither of them noticed me.

"Good-bye, Mr. Banker, I'm off!" I cried out suddenly.

And the next moment I had torn myself loose from my uncle's grasp, and was dashing down Fulton Street at the top of my speed.

"Hi! come back!" called out Mr. Banker after me; but I paid no heed.

"Stop him! Stop him!" yelled my uncle. "Stop the thief!"

His last words set the street in commotion. The cry of "Stop the thief!" resounded on all sides, and soon it seemed to me that I was being followed by at least half a hundred men and boys, all eager to stop me in hopes of a possible reward.

But now that I had once started, I made up my mind not to be captured. I was a good block ahead, and by skillful turning I gradually managed to increase the distance.

I was headed for the East River, and it was not long before I came in sight of the docks and the ferry slips. At one of the slips stood a ferry-boat just preparing to leave for Brooklyn.

The sight of the boat gave me a sudden thought. I dashed into the ferry-house, paid the ferry fare, and in a moment was on board, just as the boat left the slip.

It had been a long and hard run, but at last I was safe from being followed. Once in Brooklyn there would be a hundred places for me to go in case of necessity.

Wiping the perspiration from my face, I made my way to the forward deck. But few people were on board, and quite undisturbed, I leaned against the railing to review the situation.

What should I do next, was the question that arose to my mind, and I found no little difficulty in answering it. I was half inclined to think that I had acted very foolishly in running away. Now every one would surely believe me guilty, and if I was caught it would go hard indeed with me.

Had I better go back? For one brief instant I thought such a course would be best; then came the vision of the cell, and I shuddered, and resolved, now I had undertaken to escape, to continue as I had begun. Whether I was wise or not I will leave my readers to determine after my story is concluded.

It was not long before the boat bumped into the slip on the opposite shore. The shock brought me to a recollection of the present, and in company with the other passengers I went ashore. I had something of a notion that a policeman would be in waiting for me, but none appeared, and I passed out to the street unaccosted.

I had been to Brooklyn several times on errands for the firm, so I knew the streets quite well. But fearful of being seen, I passed close to the wharves, and finally came to a lumber yard, and here I sat down.

It was a hot day, and it was not long before I was forced to seek the shade. Close at hand was a shed, and this I took the liberty of entering.

It was a rough place, used for the seasoning of the better class of wood. I found a seat on some ends of planking in a cool corner, quite out of the line of observation of those who were passing.

Here I sat for full an hour. Nothing seemed to be going on in the lumber yard, and no one came to disturb me.

But at last came voices, and then two rough looking men approached. I was about to make my presence known, but their appearance was such that I remained silent; and they took seats close to the spot where I was.

"And the captain is sure that she is fully insured?" asked the taller of the two.

"Trust Captain Hannock to cover himself well!" laughed the other. "You can bet he has her screwed up to the top notch."

"And what is this cargo insured for?"

"McNeil didn't say. Not much less than a hundred thousand, I guess. Of course you'll go, Crocker?"

"Ya-as," replied the man addressed as Crocker, somewhat slowly. "I can't pick up a thousand dollars any easier than that."

"I thought I had struck you right. Are you ready to sail?"

"Anytime you say, Lowell. I owe two weeks' board now, and Mammy Brown hinted last night I'd better pay up or seek other quarters."

And Crocker gave a short, hard laugh.

"Then meet me at the Grapevine in an hour," said the man called Lowell. "I've got to make a few other arrangements before we start."

"Right you are."

"And remember, not a word——"

"Luff there! As if I didn't understand the soundings."

"All right. Come and have one."

The two men arose at once and headed for a saloon that stood upon the near corner.

I arose also and watched them out of sight. The conversation that they had held had not been a very lucid one, yet I was certain they were up to no good. One of them had spoken of making a thousand dollars in an easy manner, and I was positive that meant the money was to be gained dishonestly.

What was I to do? I was no detective, to follow the men, and I was just at present on far from good terms with the police. It seemed a pity to let the matter rest where it stood, but for the present I did not feel inclined to investigate it. I would keep my eyes open, and if anything more turned up, or was noted in the papers, I would tell all I had heard.

I wandered along the docks, piled high with merchandise of all descriptions. Beyond, a number of stately vessels rested at anchor, large and small, among which the steam tugs were industriously puffing and blowing, on the lookout for a job.

The sight was a novel one to me, and soon I walked out upon the end of a dock to get a better view.

"Hi, there! No loafing on this pier!" called a burly watchman; and I lost no time in moving on.

Presently I came to a wharf that seemed to be more public, and walked out to one side of it. Here it was shady, and close at hand floated a large row-boat.

The craft was deserted. Wishing to observe the scene without being noticed, I leaped into her. There was a cushion on the stern seat, and on this I sat down.

The breeze and the gentle motion of the boat were delightful, and for a moment I thought how pleasant a life on the ocean must be. Alas! little did I realize what was in store for me on the boundless deep.

As I sat on the soft cushion I could not help but speculate on all that had transpired within the last few hours. Early in the morning my mind had been free from care that was anyway deep; now I was a fugitive, not knowing which way to turn or what to do.

But I was not disheartened. I was healthy and strong and I felt confident that I could work my way in the world. But I was worried about clearing my fair name of the suspicion Uncle Felix had cast upon it. I must do that at any and all costs.

Presently a footstep sounded above me on the dock, and a well-dressed young man appeared.

"Hullo, there!" he cried, on catching sight of me.

"Hullo!" I replied, shortly. I was not in a talkative humor, and wished him to know it.

"What are you doing down there?" he went on, rather sharply.

"Nothing much."

"Do you know that that is my boat?"

"No, I didn't know it," I returned, and then jumped to my feet. "Excuse me, but I haven't hurt anything."

"But what are you doing there?"

"Only resting. I've walked a good bit to-day and I am tired. I'll go if you want to use the boat."

"Oh, no, that's all right. I don't want the boat for a couple of hours yet. You may stay where you are."

"Thank you."

He was about to turn away, but a sudden thought seemed to come into his mind.

"You say you have walked a good bit to-day?" he asked curiously.

"That's it."

"You are not out of work and on the tramp, are you?"

"Something like that," I replied. "I'm out of work and as I can't pay to journey around, I'll have to walk."

"I see. Well, I hope you strike something before long. It's not pleasant to be out of work and money."

The young man nodded pleasantly and walked away. I must confess I gazed after him longingly. I warmly appreciated the few kind words he had given me.

As I turned back to sit down once more I heard two men get up from behind a number of packing-cases on the pier, and walk away. I had not noticed them before, and I wondered if they had overheard the conversation which had taken place.

It was rather warm in the boat, and the rocking motion caused by the waves soon put me in a drowsy mood. My time was my own, and I felt in no humor to move away. I allowed my head to fall back, and almost before I knew it I had dropped into a light doze.

My wakening was a rude one. The row-boat gave a violent lurch, nearly precipitating me into the water. I tried to scramble to my feet, but some one with a big bag pushed me back.

"Here, what does this mean——" I began, indignantly.

"Shut up!" come back in hurried tones.

Then the bag was pulled over my head and arms, and in five seconds I found myself a prisoner and hardly able to move hands or feet.

I tried to cry out and to ask questions, but could not. The bag was thick, and, being tied around my neck, almost took away my breath.

For the first instant I was afraid that the police from New York had found me, but I as quickly gave up this idea. They would never treat me in this strange fashion, I felt certain. But who were my strange assailants, and what did they intend to do with me?

I felt myself lifted out of the boat and into another craft. Then I was thrown on my back and something that felt like a piece of canvas was spread over me.

The boat, with me and my captors moved off and kept moving for perhaps ten minutes or quarter of an hour. I tried to struggle to my feet, but strung hands held me down.

"Better keep still!" I heard a voice cry. "You can't escape, no matter how hard you try."

When the boat finally came to a standstill I was nearly suffocated for the want of fresh air, and I wondered if I had not been chloroformed when first assaulted. I was hoisted up by several men and placed upon my feet, and then the cords which bound me were cut and the bag was removed.

I looked around with a start. I was on shipboard, with the great ocean all around me.

"Down with him!" shouted a voice behind me.

Before I could turn to face the speaker a big black hole loomed up in front of me, and I was tumbled down into utter darkness. The hatch above was closed, and I was left a prisoner!

CHAPTER VII.

ON BOARD THE SPITFIRE

As I have said, I was tumbled into the black hole, and the hatch was closed over me. Luckily I fell upon a pile of loose sailing, so my fall was broken and did me no harm.

But I was so completely bewildered by what had taken place that for a moment I did not know what had happened. Then I gradually became wide awake, and realized that I had been entrapped on board the vessel, which was probably short of sailors.

I had read of men who were thus pressed into the service, but never dreamed that such a thing could occur so close to the great metropolis, and in broad daylight.

Who my captors were or where they were taking me was a mystery. For an instant I thought the affair might be my uncle's work, but soon dismissed that idea as being too dime-novelish altogether.

With some difficulty I rose to my feet, but the motion of the vessel, as the sailors got her under way, was too strong for me, and I was forced to lie down.

The place was intensely dark, and even after my eyes became accustomed to the blackness, I could see little or nothing. On all sides not a light was to be seen, and overhead only a single streak of brightness around the hatch was visible. I was indeed a prisoner, and must make the best of it.

I crawled about the hold for quite a while, feeling everywhere for a place to escape, but none came to hand. Meanwhile I heard the creaking of the blocks as the sails were being hoisted, and the tramp of the sailors as they hurried around obeying orders. I could hear the murmur of voices, but try my best, could not make out a word of what was being said.

Presently, by the motion beneath me, I knew we were fully under way. The cargo below me groaned as it shifted an inch or two this way and that, and for an instant I was alarmed lest a case of goods should by some chance break loose and crush me. But nothing of the kind happened, and after a while all became comparatively quiet.

I knew not what time of the day it was, but judged it must be about the middle of the afternoon. How much longer would my captivity last?

If I could have found something with which to do so, I would have climbed up to the hatch, or shoved it open. But nothing was at hand, and the opening was fully five feet above my head.

The air in the hold was stifling and soon I breathed with difficulty. I longed for a drink of water, and wondered how long I could stand being in the place should those on deck forget I was there.

But those on deck had not forgotten me, as I soon saw. Presently the hatch was raised, letting in a flood of sunshine, and then a man's head was bent low.

"Below there!" he called out.

"Let me out," I replied.

"Will you be easy if we do?" he went on.

"That all depends. Why was I brought on board?"

"Because you belong here."

"Belong here!" I ejaculated. "I don't belong to this vessel."

"Well, that's what I was told; I don't know anything about it myself. Here, catch the rope and I'll haul you up."

As the sailor spoke he lowered a piece of heavy rope. Thinking anything would be better than remaining in the hold, I complied with his request, and a moment later stood upon the deck of the vessel.

As I came up, a man, whom I took to be the captain, came towards me. He was a tall, lank individual, with a red beard and hair. The look on his face was a sour one, and it was easy to see

that he was not of a kindly nature.

"Hello, my hearty!" he exclaimed. "So you're up at last. Had quite a nap, didn't you?"

"Why was I brought on this ship?" I demanded.

"Why was you brought on board? Well, now, that's a mighty good one, smash the toplight if it isn't."

"You have no right to bring me on board," I went on, "and I want you to put me ashore at once."

The captain gave a scowl.

"See here, youngster, I don't allow any one on board to speak to me in that fashion. You've got to keep a civil tongue in your head."

"Why was I brought on board?"

"Because you belong here."

"I don't belong here."

"Oh, yes, you do."

"I'd like to know why. I never saw or heard of this vessel before."

"Come now, that's a good one. Didn't you sign papers with Lowell yesterday morning?"

This question astonished me in more ways than one. First, because I had not signed papers with any one, and second, because Lowell was the name of one of the men I had overheard talking in the lumber shed in the morning. Was it possible I had been kidnapped upon the same ship the two had been discussing?

"I don't know what you mean," I replied. "I don't know Lowell, and never signed any papers."

"Nonsense. Lowell!"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

And the same man I had seen upon the dock in Brooklyn came forward.

"Isn't this Luke Foster that signed with you yesterday?"

"Aye, captain."

I was more astonished than ever. How had they come to know my name!

"So you see there is no mistake," went on the captain, turning to me. "Now I want you to go forward with Lowell. He'll show you the ropes. Come, step lively. We allow no skulking on board the Spitfire. You've signed articles, and you've got to abide by the deed."

"I didn't sign any articles, and if he says so he lies!" I burst out in deep anger at the way I was being treated. "It is true my name is Luke Foster, but how you came by it I don't know."

"Well, you're on the book, and that's all there is to it. Perhaps you were drunk when you signed, but I have nothing to do with that."

"I don't drink," I replied, and such was and is a fact. "This is all a put-up job."

"Hold your tongue!" cried the captain. "Hold your tongue, or I'll crack your head open with a marlinspike! I don't allow any one to talk back to me. Lowell, take him forward."

"Come along," said the sailor. "If the old man gets his dander up it will be all day with you," he added in a whisper.

For a moment I stood irresolute. I had a momentary idea of jumping overboard and swimming for liberty. But land could be seen fully a good half-mile away, and no vessels of consequence were near, so I was forced to give such a course up.

I walked forward, but my mind was in a whirl. Never before had I been so completely taken in. Surely this was escaping from the law with a vengeance!

"Who owns this boat?" I asked, as we reached the fore-castle.

"Captain Hannock. She's just as good a two-masted schooner as sails, is the Spitfire; so you have no reason to complain."

"Where are we bound?"

"On an eight months' cruise, up the Down East coast, and then to England."

An eight months' cruise! What a time to stay on shipboard! But perhaps I might escape before the end of the period.

"What's the first landing?"

"New Bedford."

That was not so bad. If I could leave the vessel at that place I could easily find my way up to Boston, and a sojourn in that city would just suit me. All trace of my going there would be lost, and it was not likely that my uncle would look for me so far from New York.

"Here's your bunk, and here's some old clothes to put on," went on Lowell, as he pointed the things out. "You had better save your good clothes for shore. Knocking around the ship will wear them out in no time."

"What am I to do on board?" I asked, as I surveyed the greasy shirt and trousers with some dismay.

"Learn to do your duty as a foremast hand. If you obey orders and don't kick up any muss you'll have a first-class time of it," was his reply.

I was somewhat doubtful of the truth of this statement, but as nothing was to be gained by refuting it, I bit my lips and said nothing.

"You can take your time about changing your clothes," went on Lowell. "There ain't much to do at present. When it storms is the time all hands work lively, for their own sake as much as for the sake of any one else. When you're in working rig come to the bow, and I'll give you a pointer or two about how to tackle things."

With these words the boatswain—for such Lowell was—left me to myself.

CHAPTER VIII.

PHIL JONES.

I found the forecastle of the Spitfire a dark and rather unwholesome place. The ventilation was bad, and the smell of tar and oakum was so strong that for a moment I had to turn away to catch my breath.

Luckily my bunk was close to the doorway, so I had the best light the place afforded. Close to me was a chest, and upon this I sat down to think.

It would be hard to express my feelings at this moment. Had I gone on board the Spitfire of my own will I would not have considered the matter as bad. True, I had no great fancy for a life on the ocean wave, such as most boys are supposed to cherish. I knew that at best it was little better than a dog's existence.

"Hello, there!"

I looked up. A boy several years younger than myself stood near me. He was thin and pale, and his eyes had a frightened look.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I'm Polly Jones," he replied.

"Polly Jones," I repeated. "That's a girl's name."

"'Tain't my right name. They used to call me Phil at home, but the sailors all call me Polly here, because they say I act like a girl."

"What do you do on board?" I asked with some curiosity.

"I'm the cabin boy and the cook's help. What are you?"

"I don't know what I am yet. I didn't come on board of my own free will."

"You didn't?" Phil Jones's eyes opened to their widest. "You don't look like a sailor."

"Come down here," said I. "I want to have a talk with you."

The cabin boy gave a sharp look about the deck and then hurried into the forecastle.

"I don't want Captain Hannock to see me down here," he explained. "If he did he'd thrash the life out of me."

"Is the captain such a hard man?"

"Is he? Just you wait until something goes wrong and you'll find out quick enough. See here," the cabin boy bared his arm and exhibited several bruises that made me shudder, "he gave me those day before yesterday, just because I wasn't spry enough to suit him."

"He must be a brute!" I exclaimed. "He shall not treat me like that, I can tell you."

"I'd like to see some one stand up against him," said Phil. "None of the men dare to do it."

"What makes you stay on board?"

"I have to. Captain Hannock has charge of me until I'm twenty-one."

"He is your guardian?"

"Yes."

"He ought to treat you better. Did you ever try to run away?"

"Once; while we were at Baltimore. But Lowell caught me, and the captain nearly killed me when I got back. I could have got away, only I had no money."

"Doesn't the captain allow you anything for your services?" I asked, at the same time wondering if I would be paid for what I was called upon to do.

"Not a cent. To tell the truth he even takes away what the passengers—if we have any—give me."

"He must be mighty mean," said I.

"If you've any money you had better hide it," went on the cabin boy. "'Tain't safe here."

"Thank you, Phil, I'll take your advice. I've got four dollars and a half, and I don't want to lose it."

As I spoke I felt in my pocket to make sure that the amount was still safe.

To my chagrin the money was gone!

I must confess that I felt quite angry when I discovered that my hard-earned savings had been taken from me. To be sure, four dollars and a half was not a large sum, but it had been my entire capital and I had calculated upon doing a great deal with it.

"What's the matter?" asked Phil Jones, as he stood by, watching me turn my pockets inside out to make sure that there was no mistake.

"My money is gone!" I exclaimed. "I have been robbed."

"Where did you have it?"

"Right here, in my vest pocket."

"You're foolish to carry it loose. Any one could take it from you," said the cabin boy, with a knowing shake of his head.

"I didn't take every one for a thief. Who do you suppose took the money?"

"The captain or Lowell. He's only boatswain, but the two work hand in hand."

I had already surmised this from the conversation I had overheard. The two were well mated, and no doubt the sailor was the captain's ready tool on all occasions.

"What are you going to do about it?" asked Phil curiously.

"Get it back if I can," I replied with determination. "I'm not going to be fleeced in this manner."

"You'd better let it go," said the cabin boy, with a grave shake of his head. "You'll only get yourself into trouble, and it won't do a bit of good."

Phil Jones's advice was good, and I would have saved myself considerable trouble by following it.

But I was angry, and, as a consequence, did not stop to count the cost.

I searched my other pockets, and soon learned that everything I had had about my person was gone, including the letter from England. No doubt it was through this letter that Captain Hannock had found out my name.

CHAPTER IX.

UP LONG ISLAND SOUND.

The loss of the letter worried me even more than the loss of the money. In the exciting events that had transpired since I had received it I had forgotten the writer's name and his address. I remembered the name was something like Noddington, and that the address was a number in Old Fellows Road, but that was all.

This was deeply to be regretted, for I had expected to put myself into immediate communication with my father's friend, having any reply addressed to the post-office of the place I might be then stopping at.

But now this scheme could not be carried out. To send a letter haphazard would probably do no good.

I was so worked up over my discovery that I left the fore-castle without taking the trouble to don the clothing Lowell had pointed out to me. I looked around the deck, and seeing the boatswain at

the bow, hastened towards him.

His brow contracted when he saw me.

"Why didn't you put on the suit I gave you?" he demanded.

"Because I first wanted to speak to you," I returned. "What have you done with my money?"

"Your money? I haven't seen any money," he returned coolly.

By his manner I could easily tell that his statement was untrue.

"I had four dollars and a half and some letters in my pockets," I went on. "I want them back."

"Why you good-for-nothing landlubber!" he roared. "Do you mean to say I'm a thief?"

"Well, where's my money?"

"How do I know? Come, do as I ordered you to."

And he shook his fist at me savagely.

"I want my stuff and I'm going to have it," I went on, as stoutly as I could.

"You're going to obey orders, that's what you're going to do," he cried. "I take no back talk from any one."

"If you don't give up that money I'll have you arrested as a thief the first time I get the chance," was my reply; and I meant just what I said.

"You will, will you?" he roared. "Just wait till I get a rope's end and we'll see who is boss here."

I was somewhat startled at his words, but I stood my ground. Lowell ran to the starboard side of the schooner, and presently returned with a stout rope some three feet long.

"Now, are you going to do as I told you?" he asked, as he advanced towards me.

"Don't you dare to touch me!" I cried. "If you do you will have to take the consequences!"

"Don't talk to me!" he cried. "Just wait till I tan your back for you!"

He swung the rope's end over his head, and brought it down with all force. I sprang aside, and received the blow squarely on my shoulder. Had I not done so the rope would have cut my neck deeply.

"You big coward!" I cried; and the next instant I gave him one strong blow from the shoulder that sent him staggering against the rail.

I do not know to this day how I came to deliver that blow as I did. Perhaps it was that my temper was at its highest, and I put all my force into it. I was surprised at my own power.

But if I was surprised Lowell was more so. The rope's end fell from his hand, and his face took on a sickly green color. A number of the sailors who had seen my action gathered around in amazement, and one of them winked his eye in a most knowing manner.

"I'll have your life for that!" yelled Lowell, as soon as he could recover.

"Don't you come near me," I replied.

"I'll flay you alive!"

"No, you won't. I'm not used to such treatment, and I won't stand it."

I stood my ground, and for a moment the boatswain did not appear to know what to do next.

"Catch him from behind, Crocker," he said finally, addressing the sailor I had seen with him in the lumber shed. "I'll give him a lesson he won't forget as long as he remains on board the Spitfire, or else my name ain't Lowell."

Crocker advanced upon me to do as he had been ordered. Evidently he did not relish the job, for he came on slowly.

Not to be caught in this manner I sprang aside, and retreated rapidly towards the stern of the schooner. I did not know anything about the vessel, and finally found myself near the cabin, and face to face with Captain Hannock.

"Here, what's the row about?" he demanded.

"I want Lowell to give up the money and letters he took from me," I replied; and a moment later the boatswain came up.

"He won't mind orders, captain," he exclaimed.

"You've got to mind orders while you're on board, Foster."

"Well, perhaps I will if I'm treated fairly," I replied.

"You'll be treated fair enough, never fear. If Lowell has anything of yours I'll get it and keep it for

you until you need it. Now go forward, and do as you are told."

For a moment I hesitated. This was not a very satisfactory settlement; but evidently it was the best I could get, and so I retired.

"Bully for you," said Phil Jones, as he followed me into the fore-castle. "My, how you did pitch into him!"

"And I'll do it again if he abuses me," I returned, hotly, for I was not yet calmed down over the recent encounter.

"You look able to," went on the cabin-boy. "My, don't I wish I was as strong as you!"

"You will be some day, Phil."

Phil shook his head.

"I reckon not—leastwise, not while I have to live such a dog's life as this on the Spitfire. Say, are them your clothes?" he went on, pointing to the articles of wearing apparel Lowell had given me.

"I presume they are—for this trip. But I don't fancy them much."

And the smell of grease on them was decidedly unpleasant.

"You'll get used to them after a while. Things on the Spitfire ain't as clean as they might be, although the captain keeps me hustling to keep the cabin tidy. Can I help you any?"

Before I could decline Phil's kind offer a dark form appeared at the entrance to the fore-castle.

"Hi, Phil, you rat, come out of that!" roared Captain Hannock, savagely. "What business have you got in there? Git into the cabin and lively, or I'll warm you good!"

Phil made a break for the deck. As he passed the captain, that brute raised his brawny hand and boxed him on the side of the head.

"Take that to teach you a lesson!" the captain stormed; and then he and his victim moved out of sight and hearing.

This assault made me madder than ever. But I was powerless to assist Phil, much as I wished to do so. I could well understand the bully-like nature of Captain Hannock, and I resolved to be well on my guard against him.

After some consideration, I put on the suit of ship's clothing. It fitted fairly well, and after I had given the trousers several hitches I felt quite at home in them, and then I went on deck.

CHAPTER X.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

By the time the sun went down we were well out of sight of land. Here the breeze was even stronger; and at last several of the sailors prevailed upon the man at the wheel to send down word to the captain that sail must be shortened.

Lowell came on deck with the captain, and both had been drinking heavily.

"Shorten sail!" roared the captain. "Not a bit of it. If the mast goes, let her go."

Nevertheless, the wind soon freshened so much that several of the sails were reefed. I watched the performance from the bow.

"Here you, why don't you get to work?" cried Lowell savagely, as he came forward.

"I don't know what to do," I replied quietly.

"Don't know what to do? You're too lazy to do anything. Get aloft there!"

"Where?"

"There."

He pointed up to one of the masts. I looked in the direction indicated.

As I did so he caught me by the waist.

"I'll teach you to hit me!" he hissed.

"Here, hold up!" I cried, in alarm.

"Shut up!"

He placed one of his brawny hands over my mouth, thus endeavoring to silence me, but with an effort I cast the hand aside.

"Let me go!"

"I'll let you go when I'm done with you!" he whispered.

He was evidently in a very ugly mood, and I saw that he did not intend to treat me with any show of gentleness. Nevertheless, I was hardly prepared for what followed.

Once again he placed his hand over my mouth, and this time, in spite of my struggles, he managed to keep it there. Then he gradually forced me close to the rail.

In vain I tried to break away from him. He exerted all of his strength, and being but a boy, I was no match for him. In another moment he had me hard against the rail.

I endeavored to turn my head to see if our struggle was not noticed by some of the others. But Lowell kept my eyes turned seaward, and now he caught me about the arms and the waist.

"I'll fix you!" he went on, with a hiccough. "I'll teach you to hit me!"

"Let—let me go!" I managed to gasp.

"Oh, I'll let you go!" he went on, sarcastically. "I'll let you go quicker than you expect, you imp! How do you like that, eh?"

And the next instant he had hurled me bodily over the side. I went spinning through the air, and then fell with a splash into the waters of Long Island Sound!



I WENT SPINNING THROUGH THE AIR, AND THEN FELL WITH A SPLASH INTO THE WATER.

Lowell's attack had been so unexpected that I hardly had time to realize what was taking place, and did nothing to stop the catastrophe.

But once in the water I regained my presence of mind. I reached the surface as soon as possible, and then shouted lustily for help.

By this time the Spitfire had gone on a considerable distance ahead, and as the wind was blowing little short of a gale, I was doubtful if my voice could be heard. Nevertheless I continued to call for assistance, and at the same time did all in my power to keep afloat.

This would have been an easy matter had I not been weighed down by any clothes. But the shirt and trousers I wore were heavy, and once soaked with water they felt like lead. I tried to get them off and also to unloosen my shoes; but, as is usual in such cases, succeeded in doing neither.

At the same time I watched the Spitfire and was not a little alarmed to see that the vessel was still forging ahead. Was it possible that those on board were going to leave me behind?

It certainly seemed so, and for a few moments I was thoroughly alarmed. I was out of sight of land, and the darkness of night was fast approaching.

As I moved about in an endeavor to rid myself of some of my clothing, my arm came in contact with something which proved to be a short spar. I grasped it at once, and its buoyancy helped greatly to keep me afloat.

By this time the Spitfire was far ahead, and I had about concluded that I had seen the last of her. I noticed that some of the sails were lowered, and finally that the schooner swung around and began to tack back.

It took some time for the old craft to come within hailing distance, and once or twice she stopped, as if those on board were about to give up the search.

But finally she tacked to my right, and I raised my voice to the top of its power.

"Help! Help!"

For a moment no answer was returned, and I repeated the cry.

"Ahoy! I see you!" was the answer.

Five minutes more and the schooner was alongside. A rope was thrown over, and, thoroughly exhausted, I crawled on board.

"You rascal!" roared Captain Hannock. "Thought you could escape that way, did you? I had half a mind to let you go to Davy Jones's locker!"

And he shook his fist at me savagely.

At these words I was almost too dumfounded to speak. Did he really imagine I had jumped overboard?

"What do you mean?" I gasped. "I didn't go over on purpose. Lowell pitched me over."

"What's that?" thundered the boatswain. "That's the biggest whopper I ever heard in my life."

"It's the truth."

"Stuff and nonsense," cried the captain. "Lowell seems to worry you altogether too much. Go forward, and don't you try any more such monkey tricks again, or I'll take the rope's end over you myself!"

And Captain Hannock advanced upon me so savagely that I was glad enough to retreat.

I went down into the forecastle, and here Tony Dibble, a hand, managed to hunt me up some dry clothing. While I was putting it on the old sailor stood by, and presently said:

"I'm afraid you're going to have a hard time of it, my lad. I was thinking Lowell pushed you over, though he stood by it that you had fallen. I saw you just as you reached the water and I flung a stick after you, thinking it might keep you afloat."

"And it did," I replied. "If it hadn't been for that I might have been at the bottom by this time."

"The old man didn't want to turn back at first when he heard you were overboard," went on the old sailor. "He said it was bad luck."

"You don't mean to say he would have let me go to the bottom!" I cried.

"That's it; and me and Goller and Sampson wouldn't have it, and told him so, and then he turned back."

"I shall never forget what you have done for me," said I. And I never have to this day.

With dry clothes on I went on deck with the old sailor. Lowell did not come near me, and I saw nothing of him until the next day.

CHAPTER XI.

CAPTAIN HANNOCK'S PLOT.

The sky was overcast, and Dibble said that a storm was brewing.

"Will it be a bad one?"

"I can't say. Sometimes a little storm outside is a bad one in the Sound, and then again it's just the opposite. I remember six years ago, sailing from Boston to Norwalk that we struck a little storm that didn't look like more than a puff of wind, and yet when we were done with it we hadn't any main-topmast worth speaking of."

"I should like to see a real storm," I said.

The old sailor shook his head.

"They're nicer to sit by a good fire and read about than to be in. You never know what to expect. Besides the Spitfire's best days are over."

Presently I saw the captain and Lowell go below together. I was satisfied that they intended to talk matters over, especially when, a little later, Crocker was called to join them.

If only I could hear what was said, both about myself and about the plan to be carried out! By hook or by crook I must get within hearing distance.

Presently Phil Jones came up the companionway to throw something over the side. I immediately approached him.

"Say, Phil, do you want to do me a favor?"

"Certainly I do," replied the cabin boy readily. "I'm always ready to do a favor for any one who stands up before Lowell."

And Phil Jones gave a grin.

In a few words I told him what I wanted, stating that I wished to hear whatever the trio in the cabin had to say about me.

"Tell you what I'll do," said he. "I'll take you down to the pantry. There is a door there that connects with the cabin, and by looking through the keyhole you can see all that is going on, and hear everything, too."

This just suited me, and under pretext of getting something to eat, I went aft with him, and was soon within the pantry he had mentioned.

It was not a large place, and I had some difficulty in turning about in it without knocking down the dishes that it contained. But at last I felt that I was in a good position, and then after making me promise not to tell who had let me in if I was discovered, Phil Jones closed the door and left me to myself.

At first I could see and hear but little, but as I grew accustomed to the place I discovered the captain, Lowell and Crocker seated around the cabin table, drinking.

"It's going to be a stormy night, and no mistake," remarked Crocker, as he helped himself to some more of the liquor that stood on the table.

"Guess you're right," said Lowell. "If it's bad enough we might let the old tub go down here without going any further."

Captain Hannock shook his head.

"It won't do," he said. "We want her to sink in deep water where the insurance people can't find her. You must remember that a good part of the cargo is bogus, and if that was ever found out we wouldn't get a penny."

"How far do you calculate to sail?" asked Lowell.

"I've been thinking I'd better wait till we're about three days out from Cape Cod. We can sail a little north of the regular track, and so have things all our own way."

"Don't go too far," said Crocker. "Remember we've got to get back. Money won't do us any good if we lose our lives on the ocean."

"Don't get chicken-hearted!" cried the captain angrily.

"I ain't chicken-hearted," replied Crocker. "But what's the use of taking too much risk?"

"I ain't going to risk being sent to prison for ten years or more," cried Captain Hannock, in a rising voice. "If you——"

"Hush, not so loud," put in Lowell. "We don't want any of the others to know of what's going on. If they did they'd make short work of the three of us."

"Now don't you get afraid, Lowell. Reckon your row with that boy has taken the nerve out of you."

Lowell muttered something under his breath.

"I'll fix him yet," he said.

"Don't do it so openly," said Captain Hannock. "If you do, those who see it may get you into trouble."

"Leave me to manage the affair."

This last remark was followed by a brief spell of silence. What I had heard interested me greatly. These three men were plotting the destruction of the Spitfire with a view of getting the insurance on the vessel and her cargo. How it was to be done I did not know, but I surmised that they intended to either sink the vessel or burn her up; perhaps they intended to try both.

While I was yet thinking over what I had heard, and wondering what was to follow, there came a

loud knock on the cabin door, and Tony Dibble appeared.

"Excuse me, Captain, but the storm is coming up fast from the southeast," he said, touching his cap.

"Confound you and the storm!" howled Captain Hannock.

"It's getting ready for a heavy blow," added Dibble. "We all thought we ought to tell you."

"Get to the deck! I know my business. I'll be up when it's necessary."

"Yes, sir."

Touching his hat again Dibble withdrew. The captain brought his fist down on the table with a bang.

"Dibble knows too much!" he cried. "I wish we had left him behind."

"He's a good sailor," put in Lowell. "Maybe the storm is a bad one."

"Don't croak, Lowell; I know my business."

By this time the glasses were empty, and the three men filled them up again.

I was considerably alarmed by what Tony Dibble had said. I was sure he would not have spoken had there not been good cause. If I had not been so interested in what was going on in the cabin I would have gone on deck at once.

Yet what followed enchained my attention so deeply that I was glad I remained.

"Say, Lowell, did you read the letter you took from the lad?" asked the captain, after he had drained his glass.

"I glanced over it," was the reply. "I didn't have time to read it through."

"Well, there's a surprise in it."

"What is it?" asked Lowell; and eagerly I bent forward to catch what might follow.

"The boy is Felix Stillwell's nephew."

"What!"

"It is a fact. You could have knocked me down with a feather," said the captain. "How he should come on board the Spitfire is the strangest thing I ever heard of."

"I reckon Stillwell would be mightily surprised if he knew his nephew was with us," observed Lowell.

"And I reckon you'd treated the lad differently if you'd known who he was."

And Captain Hannock gave a loud laugh.

This bit of conversation puzzled me not a little. What did these men know about my uncle? Could it be possible that he had anything to do with the Spitfire?

I knew that he occasionally made a venture in lumber from down East. On one occasion I knew him to invest several thousand dollars in a raft from Maine, although whether it paid or not I never found out.

I had always believed my uncle straightforward and honest, but now, since receiving the letter from England, my confidence in him was shaken. He had not treated me rightly, and this being so, who knew where his wrongdoing ended?

"It don't make a bit of difference if he is the president's son," replied Lowell savagely. "I won't allow any boy to square up to me. And besides, Felix Stillwell is no great friend of mine."

"Nor of me, for the matter of that," said the captain. "But still, we must keep on the right side of him. Remember he has us where the hair is short."

"When do I get my pay?" spoke up Crocker, who was fast becoming the worse for liquor.

"That will be safe, never fear," said the captain, as he staggered to his feet, "only remember to keep a mum tongue in your head. If any one hears of our plans they may blow us sky high."

"I'm all right: only—What was that?"

As Crocker asked the last question all sprang to their feet in alarm.

I could have answered the question with ease. My position had become too cramped for me, and I had tried to change it. In doing so I dislodged several dishes from the rack, and they fell with a crash to the pantry floor.

"Some one's spying on us!" cried the captain. "Lowell, see who it is!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE STORM.

I was greatly alarmed at Captain Hannock's order to Lowell to investigate the cause of the crash in the pantry. If discovered I knew my punishment would be severe. These three men were playing a desperate game, and there was no telling what they would do if cornered.

"Oh, it was only a few dishes in the closet," said Lowell, as he helped himself to more liquor.

"It gave me quite a shock," declared Crocker, and he, too, took another drink.

These remarks relieved me somewhat. Perhaps they would not search the pantry after all. But the next words of the captain caused a chill to run down my back.

"I've lived in this cabin going on sixteen years," he said, "and I never yet knew them dishes to jump themselves down. I'm going to see what it was. If it's a spy I'll string him up, mark my words!"

I was now flat on the pantry floor, and to move would cause quite a noise. What was I to do? It did not become necessary for me to decide the question. The elements did it for me.

For at that moment the schooner gave a fearful lurch, first to the weather side and then over, and an instant later there was a tremendous crash on the deck.

For a moment the three men stood as if paralyzed, then all of them made a bolt for the companionway.

"Something's gone by the board!" I heard the captain exclaim, and then all of them passed out of hearing.

As soon as they were gone I sprang to my feet, and passing out of the pantry, made my way after them to the deck. None of the men saw me, and I lost no time in going forward.

The storm was now upon us, and, as Tony Dibble had reported, it was a heavy one. The sky was one mass of black, angry clouds, and the wind blew a perfect gale.

The schooner pitched and tossed to such a degree that I had great difficulty in reaching the forward deck, where I presently saw my sailor friend hard at work clearing away the remains of the boom of the mainmast, which had swung around and snapped off.

"Hello, there you are," he sang out. "I was afraid you had gone overboard again."

"Not if I can help it," I replied. "That is, unless it becomes necessary."

"The old man's a fool," went on Dibble. "He has no business to sit in the cabin when there's a storm on. We might all go to the bottom."

"Will we weather it, do you think?"

"We can try," replied the old sailor, as cheerfully as he could.

Meanwhile Captain Hannock was shouting at the top of his voice. But the wind was so great that little could be heard, excepting such expressions as would have been better unuttered. He was now thoroughly awake to the danger that threatened us, and did all in his power to make up for the time he had lost.

Guided by the mate, the sailors were already taking in what little sail was still spread. In the wind this was no easy matter, and some of it was torn to shreds.

"This storm will cost the captain a neat penny," said Dibble, after the work was done.

"I don't know if it will or not," I replied. "He doesn't expect to lose anything on this trip."

"How can he help it?"

"He has a way. Maybe I'll tell you when we are alone."

"Thought the old man acted awfully careless," said Dibble, as he went off.

Instead of abating, the storm increased in violence, until I could hardly keep my feet upon the deck. At first I thought of retiring to the forecabin, but concluded that if anything happened I would rather be on deck, and so remained, and held on tightly to the ropes.

Fortunately a few familiar lights from the shore were still to be seen, or otherwise we would have been driven upon the rocks. But the wheelman kept us in deep water, and just enough sail was carried to keep the schooner head up.

The storm kept on nearly the entire night, and no one on board the Spitfire had a moment's sleep. I remained on deck the entire time, and kept close to Dibble and the other sailors.

I noticed that Crocker had little to say, and concluded that he was thinking over the scheme by which he was to make a thousand dollars. I thought it rather strange that Captain Hannock and Lowell had taken such a man into their confidence, but made up my mind that it was necessary in

order to do what they desired.

As I stood upon the bow of the vessel a sudden flash of light revealed to me a sight that made my heart give a bound. It was a wreck not a hundred feet ahead of us, and driving onward at a furious rate!

For an instant I was spellbound; then I gave a wild cry that brought all the sailors to my side.

"What is it?" asked Dibble anxiously. "Are you hurt?"

"No, no. Didn't you see the wreck ahead?"

"No."

"Thought I saw something," said one of the others. "But I wasn't sure."

"What kind of a wreck?" asked the mate peering forward.

I pointed in the direction in which it had disappeared.

"A small sailboat of some kind," I returned. "I didn't see—Look! Look there!"

As I spoke there was another flash of light. For an instant all hands beheld a small sloop with a broken mast, kiting before the wind.

"You're right," cried Dibble. "Wonder if there is any one on board?"

"Can't we hail her?" I asked.

"We might try, although the wind is pretty strong."

Both of us cried at the same time, and then the mate joined in.

"Boat ahoy!"

For a moment there was no reply, and we repeated the cry.

And then came the faint answer:

"Help! Where are you? Help!"

It was a man's voice, and by its sound we could tell that he was well-nigh exhausted.

"What can we do for him?" I asked anxiously.

"We'll be on him in a moment," said Dibble. "Let's throw him a rope or two."

In an instant he had a stout rope ready. Seeing what he intended to do I also procured a rope.

During this time the mate went to the man at the wheel, and told him to steer a little to the starboard. This brought the schooner somewhat around, and gave us a chance to take in the man, should he be fortunate enough to grasp one or the other of the ropes.

"I'm afraid we'll lose him in the darkness," said Dibble.

"Let us do all we can," I said, thinking how I would feel if placed in a position similar to that occupied by the man on the wreck.

"Help! Help!" repeated the unfortunate, in lower tones.

"He's almost done for," said the old sailor, with a shake of his head.

"There he is!" I cried, as another flash of light came.

"Sure enough. Stand to catch the rope!"

"Stand to catch the rope!" I repeated.

"I will! Throw it to me!" came back the cry.

In an instant both of us threw our ropes. By an unfortunate twist Dibble's went spinning from his hands, and, before he could catch it, went over the side.

"My rope's gone!" he groaned. "Yours must do the work, boy, or the man will be lost!"

I made no reply. I had felt the rope in my hands growing tighter.

"I have the rope!" came the cry. "Pull in!"

"He's got it!" I repeated. "Help me land him."

Dibble readily complied; and slowly but surely we drew in on the rope.

"Hurry up!" called the man. "I can't hold on much longer!"

"You'll be all right in a minute!" I called back. "Don't let go."

Dibble took hold of the rope with me, and held it up so that the man might have no difficulty in climbing over the rail.

Presently the unfortunate individual came in sight. I could see that he was completely exhausted.

"Give me your hand," I said to him and leaned far over the side to reach it.

With one remaining effort he threw up his arm, at the same time letting the rope slip from his grasp.

I caught his hand and held on to it with all my power. The man's weight was a tremendous strain on my muscles, but fortunately they stood the test, and then I began to drag him over the rail.

It was no easy task. The schooner having lost part of her headway, tossed and pitched dreadfully, and once the water poured over me in a perfect deluge.

But I had made up my mind to save the man, and I did not give up. I braced myself against the rail, and then Dibble gave me his hand; and a moment later the unfortunate was safe upon the deck.

"Thank God, I'm saved!" he murmured, and then he sank back unconscious.

By this time Captain Hannock had come forward to see what had taken place.

"Humph! only another mouth to feed!" he ejaculated. "Who saved him? Did you, Dibble?"

"I tried to, but Foster was the one to do it, brave lad that he is!" replied the old sailor.

"Foster seems to carry himself high!" sneered the captain. "Well, take him to the forecastle, some of you, and let him get over it. We'll carry him to New Bedford, providing he pays for his passage."

I was utterly disgusted with Captain Hannock's brutal words, but came to the conclusion that they were due in great part to the liquor he had drunk. I helped Dibble carry the rescued man to the forecastle, and here the old sailor and myself did all in our power to bring him to his senses.

It was quite a job; but finally it was accomplished, and the man sat up.

"Where am I?" he asked, in a dazed manner.

"Safe on board the Spitfire," I replied.

"And the Dora?"

"The Dora?" asked Dibble.

"Yes; my boat."

"Gone to the bottom of the Sound," said the old sailor. "I saw her founder just as you sprang for the rope."

"You did? Well, let her go. She wasn't worth much. I'm glad I'm safe. Phew! but wasn't it an awful storm?"

"Yes, indeed," said I.

The man wanted to know how we had come to see him, and all particulars, and we told him.

He was a tall and fine-looking gentleman, about forty years of age. He gave his name as Oscar Ranson, and said he was a lawyer in New York.

"I have been spending a few weeks at Port Jefferson on Long Island, and yesterday set out for a two days' cruise up the shore," he explained. "But I've had enough of it," he added with a shudder.

We made Mr. Ranson as comfortable as possible, and, while he was sipping a cup of hot coffee, he asked me about myself, saying that I didn't look much like a sailor.

And then I told him my story. Of course he was surprised.

"I wouldn't have believed it possible!" he exclaimed. "But you have done me a good turn, and now I'll do as much for you."

"Do you know Mr. Ira Mason, a lawyer?" I asked.

"Quite well."

"He is a friend of mine. He has an office in the same building with my uncle."

"Yes? What is your uncle's name?"

"Mr. Felix Stillwell."

At the mention of my uncle's name, Mr. Oscar Ranson jumped to his feet.

CHAPTER XIII.

A NEW FRIEND.

"Felix Stillwell your uncle!" exclaimed Mr. Oscar Ranson, as he stepped up to me.

I was amazed at his reception of the news.

"Yes, sir," I replied.

"I know him quite well," went on Mr. Ranson slowly.

"You do?"

"Yes; in fact I have had some dealings with him, but—but——"

And here the gentleman hesitated.

"But what, sir?"

"Well, I don't know as I ought to tell," was the reply. "You just saved my life, and I don't want to hurt your feelings."

These words puzzled me not a little, and I said so.

"Well, the fact is, your uncle and I could never agree on some business matters. I did not think his actions were right, and I told him so, and we had quite a quarrel. But of course this has nothing to do with you."

"It will not have," I returned. "My uncle has not treated me fairly, and we parted on bad terms, so I do not care what opinion you have of him."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, sir. I used to live with my uncle."

"Are your parents living?"

"No, sir; they were killed in a railroad accident in England, and my uncle became my guardian."

At this Mr. Ranson was quite interested. He asked me several questions; and I ended up by telling him my whole story, even to the missing money.

"It's too bad!" he exclaimed, when I had finished. "I can well understand how a man of Mr. Stillwell's manner would act under such circumstances. He is a very unreasonable man."

"I suppose I made a mistake in running away," I said.

"It would have been better to have faced the music. But you had no one to advise you, and did not know but that you would be sent to jail without a fair trial, I suppose."

"What would you advise me to do?"

"Go back and stand trial. You have done me a good turn, and I will stand by you."

Further conversation was interrupted by the entrance of Crocker, who said Captain Hannock wanted to know if the rescued man could come to the cabin. Mr. Ranson rose at once.

"You'll find the captain a very mean man," I whispered, as he prepared to leave. "When we get a chance I wish to tell you something very important about him."

"All right: I'll remember."

Mr. Ranson left the fore-cabin. For a moment I was alone; then Lowell came in.

"Well, what are you doing now?" he asked savagely.

"Nothing," I replied, as calmly as I could.

"Think you're going to have a picnic of it, I suppose?" he sneered.

"I'll take things as they come," was my quiet reply.

"Well, just get on deck and help clear things up," he said. "The storm is over."

I obeyed his orders. I found the sky was now almost clear of clouds, and the moon was just sinking in the horizon. Dibble and the rest were hard at work mending the broken boom, and I turned in with a will.

It took nearly an hour to repair the damage that had been done through the captain's carelessness. When at last we had finished I followed Dibble below, and we retired.

I did not sleep well during that night on board the Spitfire. The place was strange to me, and, besides, my mind was busy with the many things that had happened to me since I had left my uncle's home.

I could not help but wonder what my uncle had done after I escaped him. Had he put the police upon my track? It was more than likely. He was not the man to let six thousand dollars slip through his hands without making a great effort to get it back.

Then I wondered, too, if my Cousin Gus had really taken the sum. I knew Gus to be a mean fellow but had not dreamed that he would turn thief. Had not the evidence been so strong against him, I would have felt sure an outside party had done the deed.

For the present I felt myself perfectly safe from capture. It was not likely the police had traced me to Brooklyn, and if so, seen me taken on board the Spitfire, which Lowell must have done as slyly as possible.

I did not much like the idea of giving myself up after having once taken the trouble to run away, but finally concluded to be guided by my newly-found friend's advice, satisfied that if he would stand by me I would be safe.

"Wake up there, Foster!"

It was Dibble arousing me. I was not long in obeying his summons. I hopped out of my bunk and rubbed my eyes.

"Time to get on deck, unless you want Lowell after you with the rope's end again."

"I don't think Lowell will trouble me much again," I replied, as I began to dress. "If he does I'll do what I can to defend myself."

"I like your grit. It does my heart good to see a boy stand up to a man like him."

"At the bottom I think he is a coward," I said. "Most all brutes are."

When I came on deck the sun was shining brightly. Captain Hannock was up, and he appeared quite a different man from what he had been the day before. His face was still flushed from the liquor he had taken, but he was sober, and, consequently, much milder in his speech.

"Take him around, Dibble," he said to the old sailor, "and show him the ropes. I guess you've got the making of a good sailor in you if you only set your mind down to learn," he continued to me.

"I'm willing to work, but I expect pay for it," was my reply.

He frowned slightly.

"We'll talk about that another time, when I've seen what you're worth, Foster," he returned, and walked aft.

Dibble took me in hand at once. He was a pleasant man to explain things, and he said I learned rapidly. By noon I knew many of the more important parts of a ship, and how the sails were raised and lowered; and as the weather was fine and we were bowling merrily along, I fancied that a life on the rolling deep wasn't half so bad after all.

As we walked around I cast many a glance about for Mr. Ranson, but could see nothing of him. Finally I asked Phil Jones concerning him, and was told he was not well and was resting in the cabin.

During my conversation with the gentleman I had made up my mind to tell him what I knew of Captain Hannock's plot. I felt sure that he would know exactly what to do. Moreover, being a lawyer, he could perhaps take steps to nip the thing in the bud.

Dinner on board the Spitfire was not an elaborate affair. The variety of food was not extensive, and the cook was not highly experienced in the culinary art. Nevertheless, I was hungry, and did full justice to what was placed before me.

"It's good, hearty stuff," said Dibble, "and that and the sea air will make you strong—not but what you're pretty strong already."

Late in the afternoon Mr. Ranson came on deck. He looked pale, and he had his head bound up in a handkerchief, which, however, he presently took off.

It was some little time before I had a chance to speak to him. But finally he saw me and came forward.

"Why didn't you come and see me?" he asked, after I had asked him how he felt, and was told that he was fast recovering.

"Foremast hands are not allowed in the cabin," I laughed. "We are expected to stay where we belong."

"I found the captain a very disagreeable man last night," he went on. "But this morning he was much pleasanter."

"He is sober now."

"Yes, and that makes a great difference in any one."

"I have something of importance to tell you," I said in a lower tone.

"So you said last night. What is it?"

"It concerns the captain and this vessel. I don't want any one to overhear it," I returned.

"Then let us go still further forward. If any one comes near we can drop the subject and pretend to talk about the ship's course."

I thought this advice good, and we acted on it at once.

CHAPTER XIV.

SOME PLAIN FACTS.

My story took some time to tell. Once Lowell came near us, but he only heard Mr. Ranson say that the schooner was making first-class headway, and taking no interest in this he walked away.

"You are sure of all this?" asked the lawyer, after I had finished my narrative.

"Yes, sir; every word of it."

"Because it is a serious charge," he continued. "In olden times they would have hung a man for such an offense, and they might do so even now if any lives were lost through the going down of the ship."

"I don't know how he intends to sink the Spitfire. I suppose he can set fire to her or else bore holes in the bottom."

"It is a most atrocious plot. I am glad he intends to do nothing until after he has left the Down East coast. Wherever he makes a landing, at New Bedford or otherwise, I can have him stopped. But the evidence must be strong against him. Otherwise we will get ourselves into great trouble."

This was a new idea. I thought for a moment.

"If you only had some one to testify to your story," went on Mr. Ranson. "Of course I believe you, but we want evidence for the court."

"Wouldn't the evidence of a bogus cargo be enough?" I asked suddenly.

"True, it would. I never thought of that. But are you sure the cargo is bogus?"

"I think it is. One thing I know: it is insured for considerably more than its value."

"What does it consist of?"

"I don't know. I think I could find out from Dibble."

"The sailor who helped to save me?"

"Yes, sir."

"It would be a good plan. But he may suspect you if he is in the plot."

"I am satisfied Dibble has nothing to do with it," was my ready answer. "I was going to tell him what I have told you."

"Oh, well, then it is all right. And I don't know but that it would be better to have help in case Captain Hannock attempts to do anything before we land."

"Just what I thought."

"Where is this Dibble?"

"He has just gone below. I will call him."

"Don't do that; it might excite suspicion. These men are undoubtedly on the watch. Talk to him in the forecastle. I will wait here until you return."

I agreed; and left at once. I found the old sailor sitting on a chest, mending some clothing.

"Say, Dibble, what kind of a cargo have we on board?" I asked.

He looked at me rather curiously.

"What makes you ask that question?"

"Because I wanted to know."

"Well," he replied slowly, "we're supposed to have fine furniture and crockery ware on board; but it's so packed up I didn't see any of it."

"Did you help load?"

"Oh, no; the longshoremen did everything. Kind of queer, too, for Captain Hannock generally gets all the work out of his men that he can."

"Then you didn't see any of the furniture or the crockery?"

"No. But what difference does it make? We sail just as well as if we had lumber or steam engines on board."

"It makes a great difference. Let me tell you something."

And taking a seat close beside him, I whispered the story I had told to Mr. Ranson.

"Phew! Smash the anchor, but that's a great scheme!" he exclaimed. "I've heard of such things being done, but never thought the captain was such a great rascal!"

"We're going to stop the game. Do you know if we could get a look at any part of the cargo?"

Tony Dibble thought for a moment.

"Just the thing!" he cried. "Come with me."

He rose and led the way to the end of the fore-castle. Here there was a small door leading to a pantry.

"There is a trap-door in that pantry," explained the old sailor. "The old man doesn't know of it. Some of the boys made it on the last trip, when we were carrying a lot of provisions, and the captain tried to cut down the rations. He saved one way but lost a good deal the other;" and the old sailor laughed at the memory of the affair.

It was an easy matter to raise the trap-door. The distance to the cargo stowed below was but a few feet, and I dropped down.

"Shall I go with you or stand guard?" asked Dibble.

"Better stand guard," I replied. "If any one comes get them out of the fore-castle the best way you can. Have you a chisel or something like it?"

"Here is one, and a wooden mallet, too." He brought the articles forward. "Be careful how you make a noise."

"I will," was my reply. "But I haven't any light."

"Here's a bit of candle. Be careful and don't set anything afire."

Dibble handed the candle to me, and then closed the trap.

By the feeble rays of the light I crawled backward for quite a distance. Finally I came to a large packing-case marked:

S. & Co. Crockery. B132. Handle with Care.

The top lid of the case was well nailed on. But after a quarter of an hour's work I succeeded in loosening one half of it, and pulled it off.



DOWN IN THE HOLD.

There was a quantity of straw next to the lid. I scraped it aside, and then took a look at what was below.

The packing-case was filled with nothing but common stones.

I had expected something of the kind, so I was not greatly astonished when I beheld the bogus crockery that filled the packing-case. I picked up several of the stones to make sure that I was not mistaken, and then restored them to their place, put the straw over the top, and nailed on the cover.

At first I thought to leave the place at once. But so far I had not been disturbed, and so I made up my mind to continue the investigation, since it was once begun.

I took up my candle, and was not long in hunting up another packing-case. This was marked Furniture. I took off some of the boards, and soon brought to light a quantity of pretty fair kindling wood!

As soon as I had made sure of what the packing-case contained, I restored the wood to its original place and then began to nail down the cover, as I had done on the crockery case. I had just driven one of the nails home when a slight noise disturbed me.

Without any hesitation I ceased my labors and blew out the light. I was none too soon, for an instant later I heard Lowell's voice.

"I was almost certain I heard some one down here!" he exclaimed, as he came forward.

"Maybe it was rats," suggested another voice, which it was easy to recognize as belonging to Captain Hannock.

"I don't think so. We have nothing to attract them this trip."

"If I find any of the men down here I'll flog them," was the captain's savage comment; and it was easy to see that he meant what he said.

"It would go rough with us if any of them should discover what we were carrying," went on Lowell. "Paving stones and kindling wood!"

"Hush! Some one might hear you!"

The two men came close to where I was crouching. Indeed Lowell's foot came within a few inches of my arm, and for an instant I did not see how I could avoid being discovered. Then they passed on.

"Must have been mistaken, Lowell," said the captain. "Guess you're getting nervous."

And he gave a low laugh.

"Better be too careful than not careful enough," returned the boatswain, slightly disturbed at the slur. "I don't want to get caught at this job."

"Neither do I."

"They can send us to prison for it."

"So they can—if they catch us. But I don't intend they shall."

The two men carried a lantern, and they swung it over their heads, casting the rays as far as possible about them.

I was in a direct line of light, and for a second the captain caught sight of the top of my head as I moved behind the case.

"Ha! what's that?" he cried. "There's something behind the box!"

"Where?" asked Lowell.

"There," and Captain Hannock pointed in my direction.

I gave myself up for lost, and wondered what I should do when discovered.

"What was it like?"

"I—I don't know."

"Let's look," said the boatswain, and he moved towards me.

In another moment they would be upon me. What was I to do?

CHAPTER XV.

CAPTAIN HANNOCK TRIES TO MAKE TERMS.

A sudden idea sprang into my mind. I would try it. If it failed there would be no harm done.

Captain Hannock's reference to rats put me in mind of cats; and drawing in my breath, I let off the most unearthly cat cry that has ever passed my lips, a cry that astonished even myself.

Both of the men tumbled back in great haste. Then the captain set up a laugh.

"It's a cat!" he cried. "Some old strayaway from the docks, I suppose."

"Must be a mighty large one," returned Lowell. "Hold the light up till I catch her."

"Nonsense! Suppose I want to get bit and die of hydrophoby?" exclaimed the captain. "Let her stay where she is. She can feed on the rats or starve to death."

And taking the lantern, he moved off towards the other end of the hold.

Somewhat reluctantly Lowell followed him. Then I heard a sound as of a hatch closing, and all became quiet.

I crawled from my hiding-place and made my way with all possible speed to the trap-door. I reached up and knocked upon it softly, and in a moment Dibble opened it from above.

"Quick!" I whispered. "They have been down after me. Let us get on deck, just as if nothing had happened."

Dibble followed my advice. On reaching the deck I found that neither the captain nor Lowell had put in an appearance. I saw Mr. Ranson still at the bow, and immediately went forward to speak to him.

"Well, how did you make out?" he asked anxiously. "You have been a long while."

"I've got all the evidence," I returned. "But we must be careful or we shall be discovered. Listen to what I have done."

As quickly as I could I related my adventures down in the hold.

"You have done exceedingly well," he said, and laughed heartily over the ruse I had used to escape detection. "Paving stones and kindling wood! It is a great swindle indeed."

"I guess we won't need any more proofs than that," I said.

"No, indeed."

A moment later the captain came on deck followed by Lowell. They gazed sharply about, and I was sure they were counting to see if any of the men were missing, for presently the boatswain entered the forecabin to see if one of the men was not there.

"I will have to leave you now," I said to the lawyer. "We must not excite suspicion."

"You are right," he replied. "I will go into the cabin and take a rest and think over what you have told me. We have as yet plenty of time in which to act."

Ranson left me, and I joined Dibble, who was at work tarring some ropes.

It was not very agreeable work, but for the sake of being near him, and at the same time to please Captain Hannock, I lent a hand, and we spent the remainder of the day together.

"When shall we reach New Bedford?" I asked, as we were going to mess.

"Depends on the wind," was Dibble's reply. "If it holds out we may be there by to-morrow morning."

"So soon!"

"Might have been there before if it hadn't been for the storm. That knocked us clear out of our bearings."

My work had made me thoroughly tired, and, as a consequence, it did not take me long to get to sleep when once I was in my bunk.

"The captain wants to see you," said Crocker, as soon as I awoke in the morning.

"What about?"

"He didn't say. You are to go to the cabin."

"All right."

Wondering what was up I pulled on my clothing and made my way aft. The captain was in the cabin alone.

"Well, Foster, I've sent for you to know what your intentions are," he said, as I entered.

"In what respect, Captain Hannock?"

"About remaining on board. Of course you came on the ship under peculiar circumstances, but I think you like the life, and I would like you to remain on board for the trip. I will pay you the same as the other hands."

Of course I was astonished at these words. What was up now? Had the captain hatched out some plot against me?

I did not know then, as I know now, that Mr. Ranson had spoken of me, and that in consequence Captain Hannock was rather alarmed over the prospects should I get ashore. Kidnapping (as Mr. Ranson had put it) is no light crime.

"I don't care to remain on board after we reach New Bedford," I replied, after a moment's hesitation.

"Why not?"

"You ought to know as well as I do."

"But I don't. You signed articles, and——"

"I didn't sign anything," I interrupted.

"Your name appears on the books," he returned, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"If it does, it's a forgery."

"I know nothing about that. But I am willing to do this: If you are willing to go ashore quietly and say nothing, I am willing that you shall do so."

"And if not?"

He frowned.

"Then you'll stay on board," he said sharply.

"Perhaps I won't," I replied with spirit. It is doubtful if I would have spoken so sharply had I not had my friends on board.

"Yes, you will. Do you suppose I am going to let a boy ride over me? Not much!"

"You had no right to take me on board."

"I have a right to take my men where I find them. Now get to your work. I will give you half an hour to think over what I have said. Then you will either sign off for the trip without pay, or you will continue on the trip."

"And my money and the letter?"

"I have nothing to do with them," he replied coldly. "Now clear out!"

I went on deck. I was satisfied that there would be lively times ahead.

Yet little did I dream of all that was to befall me ere I parted company with Captain Hannock and the Spitfire.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN IMPORTANT DISCOVERY.

When I left the cabin after my interview with Captain Hannock I knew not what to do. I was unwilling to leave the vessel with the promise that I would not prosecute him for what had been done to me, and, on the other hand, I did not care particularly to stay on board if the Spitfire should continue her journey.

Of course I knew Mr. Ranson would stop the schooner at New Bedford if he could, and have the captain, Lowell and Crocker arrested for conspiracy to defraud. But there might be some slip, and I wished to take no chances.

Had I had the London letter that had been taken from me I should not have cared what Captain Hannock wished me to do, but watched my chances, and gone ashore at the first opportunity.

Where the letter was I could not imagine, excepting that it might be in the cabin or the captain's stateroom.

One thing was certain. Whatever happened I must regain the letter. Personally it was to me of greater importance than the exposure of what was going on aboard the schooner.

I walked aft and discovered the lawyer in conversation with Tony Dibble.

"I suppose you have been to see the captain," said Mr. Ranson with a peculiar smile.

"Yes, sir, I have;" and I related the result of the interview.

"I had a talk with him about your case," went on the lawyer. "But I did not think he would get around it in this fashion. Well, I will see that you get through all right."

"I wouldn't care, excepting for that letter," I returned.

"We can get a search warrant, and hunt it up."

"But, in the mean time, Captain Hannock may destroy it. No doubt he thinks it of small account."

"If I were you I'd hunt it up on my own account," put in Dibble. "You did slick work finding out about that cargo of stones and kindlings, why can't you do as well finding out about that letter and your money?"

"I have half a notion of that sort," I replied. "What do you think of it, Mr. Ranson?"

"I'm afraid it would go hard with you if Captain Hannock caught you."

"But would I be acting right?"

"Every person undoubtedly has a right to search for his own when it has been stolen from him."

"Then I'll hunt it up if I have to turn the cabin and staterooms upside down," was my sudden determination.

"You will hardly have time while we are going up the harbor," said Dibble.

"Are we in sight of New Bedford?"

"Oh, yes. There it is right ahead."

I looked. Sure enough, land was not a great distance off.

"I'm going to get out of the way," I said suddenly. "Mr. Ranson, you will see me later."

"Do as you think best. I will stand by you."

I walked off. I was not sure of my course, and entered the forecabin to arrange my plans.

By this time the captain had come on deck. He saw where we were, and gave orders to lower some of the sails, and then called Lowell to consult with him.

Seeing that I was not being noticed, I slipped from the forecabin to the companionway. In a moment I was down the steps and in the cabin.

No one was present. Even Phil Jones was away; I could hear him talking to the cook in the galley. I had the place all to myself, and now was the chance to do the work I wished to accomplish.

I will not deny that I was nervous, and for the first moment my hand trembled so that I could hardly open what I touched.

But presently I grew more composed and even reckless, and ransacked whatever came beneath my notice.

My first work was to pull open the drawer of the cabin table. I found it full of charts and nautical instruments, accompanied by the log-book. There was also, stuffed in one corner, the ship's articles, and opening it, I discovered my name at the very end, written in a rough hand, entirely different from my own.

This was evidently the captain's or Lowell's work, and it was on the strength of it that the two hoped to clear themselves. The fact that I was a minor had not entered into their calculations.

I put the articles back into the drawer and closed it. Then I looked around to see in what direction to continue the search.

In one corner was a closet. I opened it, but found it contained nothing but bottles of liquor and medicine, the former predominating. I closed the closet and then wondered what I should attack next.

While meditating I heard footsteps on the companionway. It was Captain Hannock descending, and I had hardly time to slip behind a curtain that led to one of the staterooms when he entered.

"Confound the boy, I wonder what has become of him?" I heard him mutter. "Foster!" he called out.

I made no sound. The captain stood still for a moment.

"Lowell must have been mistaken. The young cub would never dare to come down here on his own hook."

And with this comment and a final glance around, Captain Hannock left the cabin and mounted to the deck.

I breathed more freely when he was gone. I had had a narrow escape. Had he looked in the stateroom I would have surely been discovered.

I continued my search with difficulty. The stateroom was comparatively dark, and my ears were

strained to their utmost to catch the first sound of any one approaching.

The room was that belonging to the captain. Under the berth was a locker, tightly fastened. I was certain that the locker contained what I was seeking for, because it was the one likely place that such a thing would be in. But how could I open the box?

I felt in my pockets, but they were bare of everything that could be of use to me. My eyes rested on a bunch of keys hung upon a nail near by. I took them down, and tried one after another.

At length I came to the right one, and in a moment had the locker open. The box was filled with clothing, but at the side was a smaller box or pocket, and this contained letters and documents of various kinds.

I took out the entire batch and ran my eyes over the superscriptions with all haste. The letters were all addressed to Captain Hannock with but one exception.

And that exception was the letter I had received from London.

Eagerly I opened the envelope. The contents were intact, and assured of this I stuffed the precious epistle in my bosom.

I was about to restore the remaining letters to their original place when the handwriting upon several of them attracted my attention. The chirography was of a peculiarly heavy and sloping character, and I instantly recognized it as that written by my uncle!

I was almost dumfounded by my discovery. What did Mr. Stillwell and Captain Hannock have in common?

For a moment I hesitated about opening the letters. Then I reflected that both of the men were plotting against my welfare, and I opened one of the epistles without any further compunction.

It was dated at New York City ten days before, and read as follows:

"DEAR HANNOCK:—I will be unable to call upon you to-day as agreed, and perhaps it is just as well that we are not seen together too much. The cargo is now all ready at Kinley's in Brooklyn, *well packed*. Lowell can take charge of it for us mutually. The insurance is O.K.

"I trust you have no trouble with the insurance on the vessel. Powers will fix it up for you. The New Bedford business will be all ready for you when you arrive, and you need not wait but half a day at the most. Will see you to-morrow.

"F. S."

I read the letter through with great care. When I had finished I felt sick at heart.

Beyond a doubt my uncle was in league with Captain Hannock, and the two were engaged in as big a piece of villainy as had ever come to my notice.

I turned to several of the other letters. The second was evidently a reply to one from Captain Hannock, asking if my uncle considered the scheme safe, to which Mr. Stillwell said that "nothing ventured nothing gained," and that he needed money, because he did not as yet dare to touch the amount placed in his care.

This letter undoubtedly referred to my inheritance, and I wondered how large a sum it was, and why Uncle Felix did not dare to use it for his own benefit, seeing that he would tell me nothing concerning it.

I would fain have believed that he was not yet hardened to do such a deed. But his actions towards me did not tend to confirm that idea, and I was forced to come to the conclusion that he had as yet not had the courage to do so.

I put the two letters in my bosom along with my own. Perhaps this was not exactly the right thing to do, but I did not have time to consider my actions. By the noise on deck I knew we were approaching a landing, and I expected every moment to hear some one come down the companionway.

The third letter was a long one, and very hurriedly written, so much so in fact that I had all I could do to decipher its contents. I moved over to the skylight, and was soon deeply absorbed.

"You rascal, you, what are you doing here?"

It was Captain Hannock's voice. I started in alarm, and found the skipper of the Spitfire close at my elbow.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN A TIGHT FIX.

Captain Hannock's face was deadly white, and I knew he had taken in at a glance what I was doing.

"Looking for my letter," I replied, as calmly as I could.

"Are you?" He glared at me. "You're too smart, young man. I'll have to take you down a peg."

As he spoke he advanced upon me. I saw that he had a large wooden belaying pin in his hand, and I retreated as far as possible.

But he was between me and the door, and took good care not to go round the cabin table, so I was soon forced to stop simply because I could back no further.

"Don't you dare to touch me!" I cried.

He gave a hard laugh.

"I'll do just as I please. Lowell!"

There was no answer. The captain repeated the call in a louder tone, and presently the boatswain came hurrying down the stairs.

"What's up, Captain?"

"I've found him," replied Captain Hannock grimly. "Prying through my private papers!"

"What?"

"Jest so! Come, get some rope. We'll teach him a lesson he won't forget."

Lowell left the cabin at once. I wondered what the skipper of the Spitfire intended to do next. Was he going to flog me?

I was not prepared for what was to follow. In a moment Lowell returned with a quantity of stout rope.

"Now bind him well from head to foot," said the captain.

"No, you don't!" I cried.

"Yes, we do, my hearty," returned Lowell, and Captain Hannock shook the belaying pin in my face.

"Stand still, unless you want your head split open," he commanded. "I'll have you to understand your days of fooling are over. You've discovered our secret, but it sha'n't do you any good."

The boatswain sprang upon me, and the skipper of the Spitfire assisted him. I struggled, but soon found it of little use. The two were too many for me, and in a moment I was securely bound.

"Now open the trap, Lowell, and we'll chuck him down in the hold," exclaimed Captain Hannock.

"He may yell, Captain."

"That's so. Tie a cloth over his mouth."

The boatswain procured a towel, and stuffing part of it in my mouth fastened it around my neck.

Then a trap door in the cabin floor was opened, and I was lowered upon the cargo below.

"Now you can stay there till you come to your senses," observed Captain Hannock.

Then the trap was closed, and I was left to my fate.

Fortunately for me the distance I was dropped was not great or I might have been severely injured. I struck upon a packing-case and lay there helplessly. I overheard my captors move about the cabin for some time, and then all was quiet.

The gag in my mouth nearly choked me, but try my best I could not dislodge it. The ropes about my body, especially those that were tightened around my ankles, hurt me not a little, but all my efforts to loosen them only appeared to draw them closer, until, had I been able to do so, I would have cried out from pain.

As I have said once before, the darkness in the hold was intense, and try my best I could not see a thing. Had there been a light I might not have felt so bad, but as it was I felt next to hopeless.

I wondered what was going on above. I was not kept long in suspense, for presently there was a thump and I knew the Spitfire had reached the dock.

Then came the noise of many feet, as the schooner was tied up and the sails were lowered and made fast. At length this task was completed, and then all was quiet once more.

I wondered if Mr. Ranson had gone ashore without making any inquiries about me, and if so, if he would bring down the police or other officers of the law to arrest Captain Hannock and the others.

The time dragged by slowly, until I thought the entire day had passed. I grew hungry and thirsty, and at last chewed the bit of cloth in my mouth for pure consolation. Would no help come?

At length, when I had given up all hope of seeing any one, I heard a noise at the other end of the hold, and presently saw the dim rays of a candle moving slowly about.

"Foster, are you here?"

Instantly I recognized the voice of Tony Dibble, and my heart gave a bound. I tried to cry out to him, but could not.

But, though I could not cry, I could make a noise with my heels, and this I did with a right good will.

It did not take me long to attract the old sailor's attention. He stopped short, and held the candle over his head.

"Is it really you, Foster?" he asked.

"Rat, tat, tat," I replied with my heels.

"Where are you?" he went on.

"Rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat," was all I could answer.

"Gagged, I'll be bound," he muttered to himself; and at last found his way to my side.

It did not take him long to unfasten the gag, and that once out of my mouth I was able to breathe with some comfort, a thing which gave me no little satisfaction.

"Who did the job?" he asked, as he unloosed the ropes.

"The captain and Lowell," I replied. "They caught me in the cabin."

"I made up my mind something was wrong," went on Dibble. "I couldn't find you anywhere, and was pretty certain you wouldn't go ashore without letting me know."

"Where is Mr. Ranson?"

"Gone off to get the officers. Reckon we'll have lively times in an hour or two."

"Perhaps I'd better stay down here until he returns," I replied.

"You can do that unless you want to run the risk of sneaking ashore."

"I would like to do that if I can. Where is Captain Hannock?"

"Gone ashore."

"And Lowell?"

"On deck, and Crocker with him. They'd be almost sure to see you."

This was not very encouraging.

"I'll go up and have a peep around. I don't much like the idea of remaining in this close place any longer."

And with this remark I followed Dibble to the trap-door leading from the fore-castle pantry.

We were soon in the fore-castle, and then the old sailor went out on deck to see if the coast was clear.

He was gone but a few moments.

"It's no use," he whispered hurriedly. "The captain's just come back and is on deck, and Lowell is coming down here! You had better go back for a while."

"But if they find me untied?"

"They won't know but what you untied yourself. Come, hurry up!"

I followed Tony Dibble's advice. I had hardly entered the hold when Lowell appeared.

"Is Crocker here?" he asked.

"No, sir," replied Dibble.

"Better git on deck," went on the boatswain, as he turned and left again.

"Aye, aye, sir."

Tony Dibble followed him on deck, and I was once more left to myself.

Hardly five minutes passed before I heard a sound that filled me with alarm. The ropes holding the schooner fast to the dock were loosed, the sails were hoisted, and before I could realize it we were once more under way.

What did it mean? Had Captain Hannock smelt a mouse and thus sought to outwit Mr. Ranson? It certainly looked that way.

CHAPTER XVIII.

I AM PUT IN IRONS.

I was thoroughly dismayed. All the plans the lawyer and myself had laid were now useless. He was left behind and I was on board little better than a prisoner. Bitterly I regretted not having taken the chances of getting ashore without being observed. Of what use now was all my information against Captain Hannock and his confederates? In an hour we would be far out at sea, and then the chances of doing anything to save myself would be small indeed.

Suddenly the idea of jumping overboard and swimming ashore entered my mind. We could not be far from the dock, and anything was better than to stay aboard the doomed Spitfire.

No sooner had the idea suggested itself than I undertook to put it into execution. I raised the trap and crawled up into the fore-castle. No one was there, and I sneaked to the deck.

As I had surmised, the dock was not over a quarter of a mile away, if indeed it was as far. I was a fair swimmer, and without hesitation I ran to the rail with the full intention of jumping overboard.

"Hi, you rascal, come back! Stop him, somebody!"

It was Captain Hannock's voice, and it made me run faster than ever. I gained the rail, and in another moment would have been over.

"Hi, Crocker! Why don't you stop the lad!"

The next instant I felt a hand on my collar, and I was drawn forcibly back.

"Let me go!" I cried, and twisted with might and main to free myself.

"Not so lively, my hearty!" said Crocker. "The captain says you are to stay aboard."

And despite my struggles he held me until the others came.

But now I was thoroughly desperate, not knowing what would happen if I was carried to sea. I continued my struggles even after Captain Hannock's hand was placed on my arm.

This enraged the captain and he looked around for a rope's end with which to beat me into submission.

Seeing a chance, I made another struggle, and this time succeeded in breaking loose from Crocker and gaining the rail before they could catch me again.

Splash! I was over the side and into the water.

I had taken as good a dive as possible, and now I remained under water as long as my breath would allow. Consequently, when I again came to the surface I was all of a hundred feet behind the Spitfire. I lost no time in striking out for the shore.

But weighed down as I was by my clothing, my progress was slow. Realizing how I was encumbered, I paused long enough to pull off my coat and vest and kick off my shoes, and then I struck out once more.

In the mean time Captain Hannock was letting forth a flood of vile language at everything and everybody. He wanted to know who had aided me to escape and he threatened to shoot me if I did not turn around and swim back.

The threat rather alarmed me, but as I did not see any firearm in his hand I paid no heed to it, but kept on, until the distance between me and the schooner was considerable.

But now, to my chagrin, I saw the sails on the schooner being lowered. Then I heard the captain give the command to lower the boat.

Desperately I struck out for the shore, still so far away. I knew I could not make land, but I was in hope that I might get close enough to summon assistance. There were a number of boats, both large and small, moving about, and why should I not be able to find some one upon one of these ready to assist me?

"Help! Help!" I began to cry at the top of my voice.

"He's calling for help!" I heard Crocker exclaim. "He'll have somebody from shore at hand soon!"

"Man the boat, quick!" returned Captain Hannock. "We've only got a couple of minutes to reach him in!"

Crocker and the captain sprang into the boat and two sailors at once followed. Then two pairs of oars dropped into the water and the row-boat left the stern of the schooner.

I continued to swim, but my hopes of escape were rapidly leaving me. I was still too far away from any of the shore-boats for their occupants to hear my cries, and no one but those on the schooner and the schooner's boat seemed to be looking in my direction.

A few minutes more and the boat dashed up beside me. I dove out of sight, but the keen eyes of Crocker kept sight of me and when I once more arose he put out his hand and caught me by the ear.

"Come aboard!" he cried, sharply.

"Haul him in by the ear if he won't come!" roared Captain Hannock. "We can't afford to waste time on him. The sooner we get away from this harbor the better."

"That's so," returned Crocker, and he gave my ear a tremendous pull. "Are you coming?" he demanded.

"Yes; don't yank my ear off," I replied, for the way he was treating me hurt not a little.

"Then come aboard at once."

He continued to pull my ear, and one of the sailors caught me by the left hand. So seeing it was useless to resist any longer, I clambered over the side.

On the way after me the party in the boat had picked up my coat and vest, and these Captain Hannock now threw towards me.

"Put them on and behave yourself," he said, briefly. "Pull for the schooner, boys."

I donned the garments and sat down on the forward seat. The captain sat close beside me, and during the return to the vessel his watchful eyes did not once leave me.

We were soon on deck once more, and then without warning Captain Hannock burst forth into a perfect storm of anger.

He sprang at me and struck me a cruel blow in the mouth that almost knocked me off my feet.

"That's the way to treat him," put in Crocker, "Lay it to him good, Captain."

"You brute!" I cried.

"Shut up!" cried Captain Hannock; and then he turned away to give orders to the sailors to hoist sail again.

"You'll catch it now," went on Crocker to me.

"I don't care," I returned, recklessly.

"You don't, eh?"

"No, I don't. Do your worst!"

And I would say no more to him.

Presently the sails went up once more and again the Spitfire moved away from the distant shore. With the fading away of the land my last hope appeared to desert me.

Then Captain Hannock again approached me.

"How did you get loose?" demanded the skipper of the Spitfire, as he hurried up, red with rage.

"That's my business," was my reply. "You have no right to keep me on board."

"I'll put you in irons. Crocker, get the irons, I'll show the cub who's boss here!"

In a minute the handcuffs had been placed upon my wrists.

"We've lost one man; I don't intend to lose two," said the captain. "Take him below."

I thought I was to be pitched again into the hold, but this time I was mistaken. Lowell led me to a small room situated in the extreme bow.

"You'll spend a day or two here," he said, as he locked me in. "Perhaps when you come out you won't be so disrespectful to your superiors."

The room was not as bad as the hold had been, there being a little light and ventilation. At one end was a small bench, and on this I sat down.

I was left entirely to myself. Evidently all the sailors had been forbidden to come near me. Hour after hour went by, yet no one appeared.

I wondered why Tony Dibble did not manage to send me word of some kind. I did not know that the honest old sailor was at this minute on the dock at New Bedford, speculating on what had become of the Spitfire.

At length towards evening Lowell came with a tray of food which he set down on the floor of my prison.

"You want to make the most of it," he said, as he walked away. "It has got to last you till tomorrow noon."

The food was not of the best and daintiest kind, but I was hungry, and even at the risk of starving

later on I ate nearly the whole of it. He had also brought along a pitcher of water, and of this I took a deep draught.

I sat for a long time meditating over my situation, but could make nothing out of it. As affairs had turned, I must make the best of whatever came.

I sat awake long after dark, but finally my eyes grew heavy and then I went to sleep on the bench until morning.

All the forenoon was passed in solitude. To one unaccustomed to this the experience is terrible. How I longed to have even a cat or dog to talk to! But neither one nor the other was on board.

When Lowell came at noon I asked him how long my confinement was to continue.

"Until you are ready to do your duty," he said; and not another word would he utter.

The day passed slowly, and the night was to me a restless one. What was going on in the cabin and on deck? Were Captain Hannock and Lowell getting ready to carry out their nefarious plan?

I regretted not having taken one of the other sailors into my confidence. But which of them could I trust?

By this time I had made up my mind that Dibble was not on board. Probably he had gone on a hunt for Mr. Ranson and been left behind.

I tried in vain to attract the attention of one of the men as he passed. Either he did not see me or else he did not dare to come near. If only some of them knew!

About four o'clock I fell asleep. I slept for some hours, and would have continued doing so had not a wild cry suddenly brought me to my feet.

"Fire! Fire!"

It was a fearful cry—doubly fearful on a ship hundreds of miles from land—and my face blanched as I sprang to my feet.

Could it be possible—was the Spitfire in flames?

"Fire! fire!" came that dreadful cry once more.

Then came loud voices issuing orders and the rush of the sailors' feet.

In vain I tried to catch sight of some one. The men, in a perfect panic, rushed hither and thither, but no one paid any attention to me.

"On deck there!" I heard Lowell shout.

"Where is the fire?" burst from half a dozen throats in chorus.

"In the hold—it is one mass of flames!"

"Can't we put it out?" questioned one of the sailors.

"No, the fire has gained too much headway for that."

"But we might try."

"It won't do, I tell you. We must get out a boat and leave the schooner. Ten minutes more and it will be too late."

"What, as bad as that!" came back with a groan. "Can't we save her nohow?"

"No, I tell you, idiot! I've been on board a burning vessel before. Man the jolly-boat, and lose no time!"

"Yes, yes, the jolly-boat!" ejaculated half a dozen, and then I heard another rush.

I was terribly alarmed. Captain Hannock's foul plot had been put into execution. What would the end be?

I was almost stunned by my discovery. I paced up and down my cell like a madman, but all to no purpose.

"Hurry up, men!" I heard Captain Hannock exclaim. "Don't be an hour in doing five minute's work! Use your strength!"

"Ay! ay! sir! No time to lose, that's a fact."

And the crew of the Spitfire hurried their preparations even more than before.

"Never mind your things, boys, save your lives. We may have an explosion, and then it will be too late."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BURNING OF THE SPITFIRE.

Already I could smell the smoke that was pouring out of the cracks around the hatchway. It would not be a great while before the entire vessel would be consumed.

In my cell near the bow I could hear but little of what was going on at the stern. I had no doubt but what active preparations were being made to leave the ship. I knew well enough that no means would be taken to subdue the conflagration. It was not Captain Hannock's desire to undo his nefarious work now it was once begun. The quicker every one left the Spitfire to her doom the better he would be suited.

But my attention was soon taken from the schooner and centered upon my own safety. At the start I had no thought but what somebody would come to release me, but, as the moments went by and no one came, the awful suspicion crossed my mind that the master of the Spitfire meant to leave me to my fate.

I could not at first believe this to be possible, but finally the thought forced itself home to me. No sooner had it done so than I made every effort to attract the attention of some of the sailors, who, in their panic, had evidently forgotten my existence.

I cried out at the top of my voice, not once, but a number of times. But such was the bustle and confusion on deck that no one heard me, or if they did paid no heed.

Would the captain or Lowell come? Surely, surely, they would not dare to leave me to die on board! But the moments went by, and no one put in an appearance. The captain was going to make certain that nobody should live to tell any tales against him. He had probably discovered that I knew of the plans he and my uncle had concocted.

It was not long before I made an attempt to liberate myself. The cell in which I was confined was built entirely of wood, and the door was not an extra heavy one. But with my hands locked together I was at a disadvantage. Yet terror lent me an artificial strength.

I threw my whole weight against the door, once, twice, thrice. It groaned on its hinges, but that was all. I tried to obtain a purchase upon the floor, and thereby push the door open. But the flooring was slippery, and this was a failure.

As I have said, the cell contained nothing but a bench. In my desperation I took hold of this, and was surprised to be able to pull off the heavy board seat.

For an instant I was at a loss as to the manner in which I could utilize the board; then the idea came to rest one end against the rear of the cell and the other against the top of the door, and this I did. Then I brought my full weight down upon the pry thus formed, as near the top as possible.

Instantly the door was pressed open at the top to the width of several inches. Into this opening I slid the end of the board, and by thus working it down, managed in a few moments to snap the lock, and then the door flew open.

Meanwhile I could hear the creaking of the pulleys as the jolly-boat was let down into the water. Would they leave before I could reach them?

With my hands still chained together I rushed out upon the forward deck. A heavy pall of smoke blew directly into my face, and for a moment I was completely blinded, and knew not which way to turn. I noticed that the sails had been lowered, and it was a strong west wind that caused the smoke to thus rush towards me.

By the time the wind had shifted slightly I was half choked, and staggered against the rail to recover my breath. The jolly-boat had reached the water in safety, and the sailors and Captain Hannock were not long in entering it. I tried to shout to them, but the sound only ended in a violent cough, due to the smoke, which every moment was getting thicker.

At last I got my wind, and then cried out at the top of my voice,

"Help! Stop the boat! Help!"

No one paid the slightest attention.

"Pull away, boys," I heard Captain Hannock call out; and an instant later the jolly-boat had left the schooner's side!

In vain I repeated my cry. If the master of the Spitfire heard me, he gave no heed, and as for the sailors, they were too busy doing their duty to give me a thought.

Deserted! Left to fight for life amidst the flames! Oh, how bitterly I realized the awful position in which I was placed!

The wind blew in such a manner that soon the jolly-boat was hidden from view by the smoke. Evidently all had left the schooner in safety but myself.

What was I to do now? Had my hands been free I could have done much, but as it was I was next

to helpless. For a moment I stood irresolute upon the stern. Should I take a plank or what ever came to hand, jump overboard, and trust to luck?

Suddenly a wild cry startled me.

"Save me! Save me!"

I looked, and was astonished to see Phil Jones standing terror-stricken near the companionway!

"Phil Jones!" I cried.

"Oh, Foster, is that you?" exclaimed the cabin boy, and he came running to my side.

He was deadly pale, and shook so that he could hardly speak.

"Oh, Foster, where are the others?" he continued.

"Gone!" I replied.

"Gone!" he ejaculated. "And we are left behind?"

"Yes; the cowards have taken the small boat, and we are left without any."

"What shall we do?"

"I was just trying to think. The fire is gaining headway fast."

"Can't we put it out?"

I shook my head.

"It might have been put out at the start, but it's too fierce now."

"There ain't any other boat," he went on. "There used to be, but it got stove to pieces."

"I can do but little with my hands chained together," said I. "Do you know where the key to this pair of handcuffs is?"

"On a nail in the cabin. I saw Captain Hannock put it there."

"Come, show me."

I ran into the cabin, Jones following. Here all was confusion, as if the inmates had been forced to leave in a great hurry. The captain of the Spitfire had left nothing undone to make the loss of the schooner appear purely accidental.

"Here is the key," said Phil, producing it. "Let me take them off."

In a moment he had the handcuffs loose, and I slipped them off.

"They should be on Captain Hannock," I remarked, as we hurried on deck.

"Indeed they should," replied the cabin boy, though he did not fully understand me. "I was dead tired, and went to sleep on the pantry floor, and no one came near me to wake me up. I suppose the old man would just as soon see me dead as alive."

"I, too, was left alone," I replied. "Captain Hannock and Lowell set the ship afire, and they didn't want any one to know it."

"I guess you're right," was Phil's reply. "I overheard Lowell speaking about something of the kind, though I could not quite make it out."

By this time we had reached the stern, where the smoke was not so dense. By the flames that were gradually working their way through the cracks in the deck, where the oakum had burnt away, I knew it would not be long before the entire ship would be enveloped. If anything was to be done it must be done quickly.

"We will have to make a raft," I said. "Get all the ropes you can find near at hand."

The cabin boy willingly complied. Now that he had a companion he did not appear so frightened, and he worked with a will.

CHAPTER XX.

ON THE RAFT.

While Phil was looking for ropes, I collected all the planking I could, and to this added a door or two. Then we tied all tightly together, placing the doors on top as a sort of deck.

Fortunately I was thoughtful enough to build the concern with one end resting on the top of the rail. Had I not done so it is doubtful if we could have got the raft over the side. When completed it was all of twelve feet square.

"Now take that pole and help pry her over," said I to Phil. "Try to make her strike right side up."

He did as I directed. At a favorable moment we gave the final push, and the raft went over with a mighty splash.

"She's all right," cried Phil joyfully. "Now what?"

"Get some stores together as quick as you can and jump aboard," I replied. "I'll look after some water."



ON THE RAFT.

Picking up one of the poles Phil had thoughtfully taken aboard, I placed it against the stern of the schooner, and we shoved the raft away as far as possible. Then the cabin boy took a board, and using it as an oar, propelled the clumsy craft still further, until we were at least a hundred feet off.

"There she goes! That's the last of the Spitfire!"

As the cabin boy uttered the cry there was a tremendous crash on board the schooner. Both of the masts had come down together.

The fall tore a great hole in the vessel's side. Into this the water poured at once.

At last the schooner could stand it no longer. She quivered from stem to stern. Then with a mighty plunge she disappeared beneath the surface of the ocean!

The Spitfire was no more! And Phil Jones and I were left alone upon the bosom of the broad Atlantic!

I can hardly explain the feelings that filled my breast as I saw the schooner take her final plunge and sink beneath the waves. It was to me like some gigantic living creature breathing its last. I turned to the cabin boy, and saw that his eyes were filled with tears.

"I've spent a good many years on her," he whimpered. "And all I had was on board her. It wasn't much, but it was a good deal to me."

"Let us be thankful that we saved our lives," I replied. "Captain Hannock no doubt thinks we are at the bottom of the ocean."

"By the way, where is the jolly-boat?" asked Phil suddenly.

I stood up and looked eagerly in all directions. Not a craft of any kind was to be seen.

"She's gone," I replied. "I suppose they have a compass, and have set out for the shore."

"If it wasn't for a couple of the men, I'd like to see the boat swamped," said Phil.

"Captain Hannock will be surprised if we ever meet again," I replied.

"I don't want to meet him again. I won't live with him. I'll kill myself first."

I was surprised at the determination with which the cabin boy uttered the words.

"You are right," I replied. "Captain Hannock is not a fit person for any one to have in charge. If we ever escape, depend upon it I will do all in my power to see that you are treated better in the future."

"Will you? Oh, thank you very much!"

The sun was now rising quite high in the eastern sky, sending broad sheets of light over the ocean. I climbed up on the top of the water cask and gazed eagerly around in all directions.

Not a boat was in sight.

"See anything?" asked Phil.

"Nothing but water and sky," was the reply. "We must shift for ourselves and no mistake."

Luckily for us the planks we had lashed together were of sufficient buoyancy to cause the doors above them to ride clear of the waves, so we were comparatively free from the wash of the sea, although occasionally a wave broke over the flooring.

"We will lash the cask fast," said I, "and then fasten the box of provisions on top of it."

"That's a good idea," replied the cabin boy. "If the water strikes the food it won't be of much account."

We did as I had suggested, first, however, drawing sufficient water from the cask to last us for the day.

"Now if we could hoist a sail we'd be all right," said Phil.

"Let us see if we can't raise the oar between the doors. I think if we can, we can tie some ropes fast to steady it and put the sail on it."

"We haven't any boom."

"Maybe we can split off a side of one of the doors and make one."

"We can try," responded Phil. "We ain't got much else to do. Gracious, ain't I glad I ain't alone."

"So am I," was my warm rejoinder. "We'll live or die together."

"I ain't much afraid of dying, now you are with me."

Planting the oar for a mast was no easy matter. Of course we did not attempt to do it until we had made the boom, and also a small crosstree at the top, from which we suspended the sail, not very artistically, it is true, but in such a fashion that it drew very well.

"There we are!" cried Phil, when the task was accomplished. "What's the matter with that?"

"Nothing," I replied. And then added with a laugh:

"Let us go into a firm: Jones & Foster, Boat-builders and Sailmakers."

Phil laughed heartily.

"You're right! I'm glad it's up. It looks more like a regular boat now."

"It will act as a signal as well as a sail," I replied, "and we need both."

"Now we've got the sail, how are we going to steer, and in what direction? The ocean looks all alike to me."

"We will have to be guided by the sun. I know land is to the west of us, though how far I haven't the least idea. And we'll have to make a rudder of some kind out of another piece of the door."

"Suppose we run across Captain Hannock and the jolly-boat?"

"It isn't likely, and if we do we will have to make the best of it. I'll stand no more nonsense."

CHAPTER XXI.

NIGHT ON THE HASTY.

After the sail was rigged and the rudder lashed in position, we took our first meal on the raft. I was hungry, but fearful of exhausting our stock of provisions before we reached land or help of some kind, I ate no more than was absolutely necessary, and the cabin boy did the same.

"What will we name the raft?" asked Phil, as he held a cup of water aloft.

I thought an instant.

"How would the Hasty do?"

"Just the thing!" he cried. "We were mighty hasty in building her. The Hasty she is."

And by drinking the water he so named the raft upon which we passed so many anxious hours.

It must have been near eleven o'clock before the morning meal was concluded. By this time the sun was almost overhead, and poured down hotly upon us.

"This won't do," I said, feeling my face nearly burning up. "We must rig a covering of some kind."

There was a small part of the sail that was not used. This I cut off, and putting the center of it over the box of provisions as it rested above the cask, I fastened the four ends to the corners of the doors, and that gave us a miniature cabin, in which we took turns in resting.

By good fortune there was a stiff breeze blowing directly from the east, so by skillful management, we kept the head of the raft pointed in the direction we wanted to go.

As we sailed along Phil Jones told me much concerning himself.

"I've lived with Captain Hannock ever since I can remember," he began. "My father was a sailor, and he died on board the Spitfire, leaving me in charge of those on board. My father was mate, and I've heard that Captain Hannock was a better man in those days."

"Wasn't your mother living?"

"No: she died when I was a little baby. That's the reason, I suppose, the captain took me in charge."

"Then perhaps he had no legal right to do so."

"I don't know about that. But I'm sure he had no legal right to bang me around the way he did."

"Certainly not. And he shall not do so in the future."

Then Phil asked me about myself, and I told him much of my history. He was not very old, but the sharp knocks he had received had given him a wisdom beyond his years.

Talking made the time pass more swiftly, and before we knew it the sun was sinking in the west. It would not be long ere the night would be upon us.

"Let us lose no time, but sail along as far as we can," I said.

"How about sailing by the stars?"

"I don't know anything about that."

"I know a little."

"Then we won't lower the sail until it is absolutely necessary. Come, you take a nap if you can, and I will steer as long as the sun lasts, and then you can take the rudder."

To this the cabin boy readily agreed. He was soon asleep, and I was virtually left alone.

As the evening shadows deepened I realized for the first time our forlorn condition. Here we were, afloat on the bosom of the broad Atlantic, with no land or sail in sight. What would the outcome of this adventure be?

From the present my mind drifted to what had been left behind. I had no doubt but that my Uncle Felix was searching for me in every direction. Perhaps he had even made offers of reward for my discovery. Six thousand dollars was no mean sum to lose, and I knew him well enough to understand that he would well-nigh turn the metropolis upside down ere he would submit to it.

I could understand that my running away made it look bad for me. Every one would say, if I was innocent why had I not stood my ground? Even Mr. Banker and Mr. Mason might shake their heads and have their doubts.

Then I thought of the evidence I held in my pocket against Mr. Stillwell and Captain Hannock. If I reached shore in safety, what a sensation it would produce! Had my uncle treated me with more consideration I would have had some hesitation about exposing him even though he deserved it and justice demanded it. But not for an instant had he thought of how he was ruining my good name for all time. And I had been innocent while he was guilty. He must suffer the penalty of his misdeeds.

I could not help but think of Mr. Ranson and Tony Dibble. What had become of the two? Would they watch for Captain Hannock's return and expose him at once?

Slowly the evening wore on, until the last trace of sunshine had gone and only the stars shone down upon the Hasty. Phil was fast asleep, and I did not like to wake him, so much did he appear to enjoy the nap. Poor boy! for once he knew that he would not be aroused by a kick or blow!

It must have been ten o'clock when Phil did awaken. He rubbed his eyes and sat up.

"Where am I? Oh, I remember! How good of you, Luke, to let me sleep so long!"

"It's getting pretty dark now, Phil. Are you sure you can steer?"

"I think so."

I handed him the rudder and lay down under the canvas. At first I was too restless to sleep; but after awhile tired nature could stand it no longer, and I dropped into a heavy slumber.

"Wake up, Luke, wake up!"

"What's the matter?" I exclaimed.

"I can't say, but something is wrong," he returned.

At once alarmed, I tried to crawl from under the bit of canvas. When I had accomplished this feat—which was not easy, considering how the Hasty rolled and pitched—I gazed at Phil and saw that he was trembling violently.

"What is it, Phil—what scared you?" I went on.

"We struck something," he cried. "I most believe it was part of a boat."

"Something from the Spitfire most likely," I returned.

"I don't know—but—but——"

"But what, Phil—what ails you?"

"I believe there was a man on it!" he said, in an awful whisper. "I couldn't see very well. It gave me a fearful scare."

"A man! Are you sure?"

"No, but it looked like a man. My, it was terrible!"

"You look it. In what direction was it?"

Phil pointed over his left shoulder. I peered through the gloom as best I could, but could see nothing.

"Well, it's gone now, whatever it was," I said. "Are you quite sure you didn't fall asleep and dream it?"

"Oh, I wasn't asleep. I'm not a bit sleepy after my long nap. I am sorry I disturbed you, but—but I couldn't help it."

"That's all right," said I, with a yawn. "Well I might as well turn in again, eh?"

"Yes, turn in by all means."

Once more I crawled beneath the canvas. I had not heard a single cry, and I was inclined to think that Phil had been mistaken concerning a person on the wreckage he had seen.

My short nap had only made me more sleepy and it was not long before I dropped off into a sound slumber, which even the fitful motion of the raft did not disturb.

"Luke! Luke!"

It was Phil's voice again, louder than ever before.

"Now what's up?" I replied, not in the best of humor.

"We must be careful. We have struck——"

The cabin boy did not have time to finish the sentence for at that instant the Hasty received a terrific shock which nearly split her in two.

"Oh, Luke, what shall we do?" cried Phil, in alarm, as soon as he could catch his breath.

Before I could answer there came another shock. A moment later Phil and I were struggling in the dark waters!

CHAPTER XXII.

A TERRIBLE LOSS.

To be suddenly aroused out of a sound sleep, and immediately afterwards to find yourself struggling in deep, dark water is not an experience to be desired. The first plunge made me shiver from head to foot, and it was only by instinct that I kept my mouth shut and struck out to keep myself afloat.

I had not the slightest notion of what had happened, and in the darkness could see nothing. It was some time ere I could recover and call out to the cabin boy:

"What is it, Phil? Where are you?"

"Here I am," he cried, close beside me; and an instant later his hand touched my body.

"What happened?" I repeated.

"I don't know," he replied. "Either something struck the boat, or else we hit a rock."

"I don't think we are near enough to shore to strike a rock," I rejoined.

"Well, what was it then?"

"I don't know, and what's more I'm not going to try to find out just at present. Where is the raft?"

"I guess the Hasty has gone to the bottom. I can't see her anywhere around."

"Don't be foolish. She couldn't sink."

"That's so; I forgot. Well, where is she then?"

"We must find her. Can you keep on swimming?"

"For awhile. But don't leave me!" added the cabin boy in sudden alarm.

"I won't. We can swim together. Take it easy."

Side by side we struck out. My thoughts were busy. Suppose we were not able to find the raft? To swim any great distance would be impossible, and we could not float forever.

"It's hard work, and no mistake," said Phil, after a few moments of silence. "I can't go much further."

"Suppose we let ourselves drift with the current."

"That's a good plan, for I suppose the Hasty did the same thing."

So we allowed ourselves to drift for fully ten minutes. Fortunately both of us were good swimmers, and understood the art of floating. If not, it might have gone hard with us.

"What's that ahead?" cried the cabin boy, at length.

"Where?"

"There! To the right!"

I strained my eyes. Was it a light? Yes; not one but several, and all moving rapidly away.

"It's a boat!" I cried. "Let us yell."

And yell we did; once, twice, and then a dozen times, in a tone that made me so hoarse I could hardly speak afterwards.

"It's no use," said Phil. "It's a steamer, and they won't pay any attention."

"I shouldn't wonder but that it was the vessel that struck us?" I exclaimed.

"Most likely. But if they would only pick us up I wouldn't care a straw."

After this there was another interval of silence. Then my arm struck something hard. I put out my hand, and was overjoyed to find that it was the raft.

"Here she is!" I cried. "Here's the Hasty."

"Thank our stars!" returned Phil; "I couldn't have held out much longer."

It did not take us long to get aboard, and completely exhausted we sank down on the flooring and panted to get our breath.

There was no more sleep for us that night, so we both sat close together, and talked of what had struck us, and what damage it had done to the raft.

"The rudder is smashed," said Phil.

"Never mind, we can make another in the morning," I returned. "It's too dark to do anything now."

So we let the raft drift at will, trusting the wind was still blowing us toward the shore.

Slowly the night wore on, and at the first streak of dawn we were both in motion. It seemed a shame to rip up another part of the flooring to make a rudder. Yet there was no help for it. While doing so I noticed that the doors were unusually wet, but gave it no attention, thinking it had been caused by the raft dipping under when the vessel had struck us.

At last we began to get hungry, and Phil hauled some crackers from the provision box.

"They will make us mighty thirsty, and we haven't much water," he said. "But I hadn't time to hunt up just the best things to take along."

We ate our crackers, and when we had finished them I turned to the cask to get some water. I

pulled out the bung, and was horrified to discover that the cask was empty!

"The water's gone!" I gasped.

"What!"

"It's true; there isn't a drop in the cask!"

Phil was fully as much dismayed as I was. Alone on the broad Atlantic and not a drop to drink!

"We can't live without water," he cried.

"I know that. It is worse than being without food."

"Ten times over. Where has the water gone?"

We examined the cask carefully. At the bottom was a bunghole in which a bung had been placed; but either the riding of the raft or the shock had loosened the bung, and it had dropped out and allowed the water to run away to the last drop.

"We are done for now!" groaned Phil. "We can't stand it twenty-four hours without something to drink."

"Perhaps we'll have a change in luck before that," said I; but I had my doubts.

The hours that passed after I made the discovery were terrible ones. We suffered intensely from thirst, and I was almost tempted to drink the salt water that surrounded us. Had I done so this tale would probably have never been written.

When the noonday sun shone down upon us we could not stand to be out in it. Phil crawled under the canvas, his eyes rolling strangely.

"Water! water! oh, give me water!" he cried.

I was startled. Was the poor boy going insane?

"Let me wet the canvas," I said. "It will make it cooler."

I did as I suggested, and the cabin boy declared it was much better than before. Then I coaxed him to try to sleep, and at last he fell into a troublesome doze.

Throwing more water on the canvas until it was sopping wet, I crawled in beside him.

But not to sleep. My mind was in a whirl, and I could not think clearly. My mouth was parched, and my tongue so thick that when I tried to utter some words in reverie I could not, a thing that frightened me still more.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DEEP BLUE SEA.

I lay several hours under the canvas, wondering how the adventure would end. At present things looked rather blue, and perhaps neither Phil nor I would live to tell the tale. At length, when I was about to give up in despair, a low rumble brought me to my feet instantly.

It was thunder!

"A storm! a storm!" I cried. "Pray God it brings us rain!"

My cries awoke Phil, and he pushed the canvas aside.

"What did you say?" he asked, feebly.

"There is a storm coming up," was my reply. "Hear the thunder?"

"What of it?"

"What of it? A storm means water, and water means something to drink!"

"Hooray! so it does!"

And the cabin boy jumped to his feet at once.

It is wonderful what life the prospect of rain put into us. Eagerly we watched the approach of the dark clouds that were fast bearing down upon us.

"We must fix the cask to hold water," I said, "and also the canvas."

"And we can fix the sail, too," added Phil. "We must catch as much as possible."

I put the bung back into the cask, hammering it in well. Then by the aid of the mast, rudder and boom, we hung the canvas so that every drop that might fall upon it would be caught and poured into the cask.

Hardly had we finished our preparations when the storm bore down upon us. The lightning was terrific, the thunder deafening, and the rain came down in a deluge.

We heeded not the storm. We drank our fill of the first water that entered the cask, and oh, how good it seemed! Many a time since I have drunk spring water of the purest and coolest, but nothing that could compare with that which Phil Jones and I caught on the canvas in the middle of the Atlantic.

Our thirst satisfied, we turned our attention to filling the cask. It was not long before we had it more than half full, and as the cask was a twenty-gallon one, this was not bad, and would last us quite some time.

Of course we had to pay considerable attention to the raft, which at times tossed and pitched in a fashion that made me sick all over, and rendered it necessary to hold on tightly to prevent being swept overboard.

For two hours the storm continued without showing any signs of abating. By this time we were wet to the skin and shivering with the cold.

"Now we've got water, I wish it would clear off," remarked Phil, as he stood holding fast to the mast.

"So do I. It's no fun thinking that any moment we may be swept overboard."

"Hope the jolly-boat is out in it," he continued. "Captain Hannock deserves all the ducking a-going."

"He can't be to land yet. Wonder if all the sailors are with him?"

"I suppose so. I'm sure there wasn't a soul left on the ship."

Instead of letting up, the sky grew darker and the wind increased in fury. The Hasty bounded up and down over the mighty swells, and many were the times that I thought our last moment had come. Yet each time the clumsy raft righted herself, ready to battle with the next wave.

Not without considerable danger I managed to tie the planks more tightly together. That rude structure now seemed to be our only hope for safety.

And thus the night of awful peril wore on.

"This is the very worst storm I ever saw."

It was Phil who uttered the words. He was lying flat on the top of the cask, holding on tightly to the ropes that held the mast. He had been in that position for fully two hours, and it was plain to see that he was nearly exhausted.

"Keep up your courage," I replied. "The worst is over, I'm certain. This storm wouldn't appear so bad if we were on shipboard."

The box of provisions had become thoroughly water-soaked, and it was now resting on the flooring of the raft, and I was using it to lie upon, so that the waves might not wash over me so freely.

Far over in the east I could see a faint break in the clouds, and to this I laid my hope of a change for the better. But the cabin boy shook his head.

"Storms don't clear that way."

"Yet this one may."

"Hope you're right, but I don't think so."

An instant after these words there was a terrible clap of thunder, and following it a deluge of rain that almost swept us from the raft.

"I'll venture to say that's the end of it," said I.

After the downpour was over it began to brighten, and in the course of half an hour there were several rifts in the clouds. We watched them eagerly.

"Don't know but that you were right," said Phil at last. "See! see! the storm is drifting southward!"

"Thank fortune for it," was my reply. "I never want to pass through another like it!"

In another hour the rain had ceased. I judged it was now about four o'clock, and I was not far out of the way, for about an hour or so later the sun rose and peered dimly through the haze.

It was not long before it was as bright and clear as ever. But the water was still in a turbulent state, and every minute or two a wave would break over us with a swash and a crack decidedly unpleasant.

As soon as I was able to do so I overhauled the provision box with a view to saving what might still be fit to eat.

It was in a sad mess, and the salt water had made most of the things worthless. The crackers and bread I threw away at once, and this left us with nothing but some potted beef, a jar of pickles and some canned corn and asparagus—rather an odd collection, but decidedly better than nothing.

"We will have to live on closer mess than ever," I said, as I viewed the stuff.

"I won't mind that so long as we have enough to drink," returned Phil. "I can stand hunger, but I can't stand being dry."

"You're not very dry now," said I, with a faint attempt at humor.

The cabin boy gave a laugh.

"I don't mean that way. Guess our clothes will dry fast enough when the sun gets up."

The morning proved a long and warm one. We did all we could to pass the time pleasantly, but it was a failure. There was no concealing the fact that we were both anxious about our situation.

It must not be supposed that because I write so calmly of this involuntary cruise that we were not frightened, for such is not a fact. Both of us were greatly alarmed, and would have given about all we owned to be once more on dry land.

About every hour one or the other of us would climb up to the top of the mast and look in all directions for a sail or land. This we did until we were almost ready to give it up, as nothing appeared.

Our dinner was a curious one, some potted beef and cold green corn, washed down with a cup of cold water.

"Funny we didn't think of this corn when we were so thirsty," said Phil. "It would have done pretty well for a time."

"I didn't know it was there," I returned. "Never mind; it's over now, and I hope we don't have any such experience again."

CHAPTER XXIV.

PICKED UP.

The afternoon drifted into evening, and somewhat disheartened we prepared to pass another night on the Hasty. We arranged that Phil should sleep first for about three hours, and then I was to take my turn.

"Tie yourself fast," said I, "or you may roll off."

He followed my advice, and it was not long before he was in a sound slumber. I sat on the cask, steering as well as I could by the stars. Suddenly from out of the gloom ahead an object loomed up. I started to my feet and strained my eyes.

It was a steam yacht!

For an instant I could hardly believe my eyes. Then I gave a wild cry that caused Phil to jump up in alarm.

"What is it?" he asked anxiously.

"A ship!"

"A ship! Where?"

"Dead ahead. Let us hail her."

And together we called out as loudly as we could:

"Ship ahoy!"

There was no answer; but the yacht came nearer.

"Ship ahoy!"

"Ahoy here!" came back the welcome cry.

Then we heard the engine of the craft cease to work, and presently the long, slim yacht came close beside us.

"Who are you?" asked some one from the deck.

"We are shipwrecked from the Spitfire," replied Phil.

"Will you take us on board?" I added.

"Certainly; we have been looking for you," came the strange reply.

But at that instant I recognized Mr. Ranson standing at the rail! The lawyer looked highly pleased to see us, and waved his hand.

In a moment a rope was thrown to us from the yacht, and without any difficulty we ascended to the deck, where a small crowd of men surrounded us.

"Right glad am I to see you!" exclaimed Mr. Ranson, as he shook me by the hand. "And you, too," he added to Phil.

"Where are the rest of the crew?" asked the captain of the yacht.

"I don't know," was my reply. "They went off in the jolly-boat and left us behind."

"You can tell your story in the cabin," put in another man, who was dressed in navy-blue and wore a badge upon his breast.

"Yes, that would be best," said the lawyer. "How do you feel?"

"All right."

"A little hungry," added Phil.

"You shall dine at once," said the captain, a man by the name of Flagg.

He led the way to the cabin, and the lawyer, the man in navy-blue, Phil and I followed.

"This is Luke Foster, and this is Philip Jones," said Mr. Ranson, presenting us. "Captain Flagg, and Mr. Henshaw, of the government force."

We all shook hands and sat down. Then Phil and I told our stories straight to the finish, and I also produced the letters I had taken from the locker in Captain Hannock's stateroom.

"A serious case, a serious case indeed," said Mr. Henshaw, when we had finished. "Will you let me retain these letters?"

I looked at Mr. Ranson.

"Yes; let him have them. The matter is now in the hands of the government."

By the time our story was at an end the supper was served, and never did two boys make a heartier meal than did Phil and I. As we all sat around the table Mr. Henshaw asked us many questions, and made numerous notes of our answers.

"And how did you come to be out here for us?" I asked of the lawyer.

"Didn't I promise to help you?" he replied. "When I left the Spitfire it was my intention to return before she set sail again. I was under the impression that you had gone ashore, especially as Dibble thought so too."

"Where is Dibble? He was not on board."

"He, too, was left. Captain Hannock sent him ashore on an errand, and set sail before either of us could return. I think he must have smelt a mouse."

"He'll smell a still bigger mouse when he reaches shore," said the government officer, with a broad laugh. "Burning a vessel and a bogus cargo that are heavily insured is no light offense."

"Where do you think he will land?"

"The first place he strikes. It isn't much fun sailing around in a jolly-boat."

"It is my idea that he will land at Nantucket," said Captain Flagg.

"It won't make much difference to us," said the lawyer. "We will certainly hear of him in a few days, when he comes to make his claim. He won't lose much time in doing that, you can depend."

"And in the mean time I can telegraph to New York to have this Stillwell arrested," went on Mr. Henshaw.

I gave a start. I had not thought of such an occurrence.

"What's the matter?" asked the government officer, noticing me.

"Stillwell is Foster's uncle," explained the lawyer.

"Indeed! Well, I am sorry for you, but the law is no respecter of persons. Prince and pauper are alike to Uncle Sam."

"Mr. Stillwell is my uncle only in name," I replied. "He has never treated me half decent, and is even now trying to defraud me out of my inheritance."

"Indeed! Then there is no love lost between you."

"Not a bit, sir."

"By these letters I should say he was not a man to be trusted."

By Mr. Ranson's advice I told my story. Mr. Henshaw was deeply interested.

"It was a great mistake in one way to run away," he said. "But in another it has helped to gather evidence against him, evidence that will count for much. But let me tell you one thing."

"Well, sir?"

"I doubt if his son took that money."

"But he was in the office."

"Only for a short while. That money was gone before the office was opened in the morning."

I could hardly believe that. When I had opened the office and swept it everything appeared all right.

"Mark my words if I am not right," went on the government officer.

"I can't see how a thief from the outside could get in the place," I replied.

"No: but a thief from the inside——" said Mr. Ranson, dryly.

I started, struck by a sudden thought.

"You don't mean——?" I began.

"What?"

"That my uncle took that money himself?" I burst out.

"I don't say he did, but it may be so," said Mr. Ranson slowly. "He has your money in trust. The letter to Hannock says he does not as yet dare to touch the money in his charge. With you in prison he could do as he pleased. Do you follow me?"

"I do; and it's as plain as day. But I never thought my uncle was such a villain!"

"I do not say he is; but it looks so. Who would have thought him in league with Hannock?"

"No one in New York surely," said I.

I could not help but think what a sensation my uncle's arrest would produce. How Mr. Banker would stare when he heard of it! I was sorry for my aunt's sake, but Mr. Stillwell had brought it upon himself.

Then I wondered if I would be able to clear myself. One thing gave me not a little comfort. It was Mr. Ranson's words:

"Remember, they have got to prove you guilty. Until that is done every man is considered innocent."

Yet this did not entirely satisfy me. I wanted to prove that I had not taken the money. If I did not I was sure there would be some who would always look down upon me.

Now that Mr. Ranson had found us, the course of the steam yacht was changed, so that we headed directly for Boston. Phil and I were assigned a cosy stateroom, and it is perhaps useless to state that both of us slept soundly.

Early in the morning I was aroused by a cry on deck, and the next moment there was a sharp rap on the door.

"What is it?" I asked.

"We have sighted the jolly-boat!" was Captain Flagg's reply. "You and Jones keep out of sight and there will be fun ahead."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE CAPTURE ON THE OCEAN.

It did not take me long to dress after Captain Flagg made the announcement that the jolly-boat had been sighted. I was eager to find out how the occupants had fared, and what Mr. Henshaw, the government officer, would do with them.

In a few moments Phil Jones and I had on our clothing, and both of us stepped out into the cabin, where we found Mr. Ranson awaiting us.

"Where is the boat?" I asked.

"Not over a quarter of a mile away," he replied. "Mr. Henshaw says you two and myself are to keep out of the way, and he will give Captain Hannock, Lowell, and the rest a complete surprise."

"All right. I suppose if the captain saw us aboard he wouldn't feel much like coming on deck."

"You are right. But he would have to, nevertheless. Mr. Henshaw will place him under arrest immediately."

"I would like to see what takes place," I rejoined.

"So would I," put in Phil. "Captain Hannock is no friend of mine."

"Captain Flagg has assigned us three a place where we may see all that happens," returned the lawyer. "Come with me."

We followed him on deck. Close to the wheel was a small covered place used for storing odds and ends of various kinds. It contained a window so that one might see, and the door was covered with a wire netting, through which we might hear all that occurred.

It was this place that we entered, closing the door tightly behind us. No sooner were we inside than I heard the voice from the jolly-boat sing out:

"Yacht ahoy!"

"Hello, there! Who are you?" was the answer returned.

"Survivors of the schooner Spitfire," said a voice which I recognized as that belonging to Lowell. "Will you take us aboard?"

"Yes. Lay to under our bow."

The yacht stopped moving, and a moment later the jolly-boat came alongside, and Captain Hannock, Lowell, Crocker, and the sailors stepped aboard.

"Who are you?" asked Captain Flagg of Captain Hannock; and I noticed that Mr. Henshaw had laid aside his navy-blue suit and badge, and was standing by apparently as an ordinary passenger.

Captain Hannock told him, and also introduced the rest.

"My schooner, the Spitfire, bound for Liverpool, took fire and sank," he continued. "We just had time to get out the jolly-boat and get a cask of water and some few things to eat when she went down."

"Indeed!" replied Captain Flagg. "How did she catch fire?"

"I can't imagine, excepting that it was set afire by a hand on board who changed his mind about going and wanted me to let him land before we started."

This was certainly cool, to say the least. Of course Captain Hannock meant me. Mr. Ranson pinched my arm.

"Where is that man?" asked Mr. Henshaw.

"I don't know. I wanted him to get into the jolly-boat, but he was sassy, and told me to mind my own business and he'd look out for himself."

"What was his name?"

"Luke Foster. He wasn't very old."

"Are all the rest here?"

"All but the cabin boy."

"Where is he?"

"Dead, I guess. My boatswain here says he saw him jump overboard out of sheer fright as soon as he saw the fire."

"My, what a whopper!" exclaimed Phil under his breath.

"Yes, I guess he's gone to Davy Jones's locker," put in Lowell. "He was a very nervous lad."

Captain Flagg continued to ask questions, and Captain Hannock and the others related their experience since the jolly-boat had left the Spitfire. He said they had a compass on board, but during the storm it had been washed overboard, and they were then compelled to steer by the sun and stars. Then the supply of eatables had fallen short and the sailors had quarreled among themselves on account of it, though he would make no complaint against the poor fellows.

"You don't look starved, Captain Hannock," said Captain Flagg coldly.

"I never show it in my face," was the smooth reply. "But all the same, I am mighty hungry."

"You shall have breakfast very soon." And then as Mr. Henshaw gave him a peculiar look, the captain continued:

"Won't you step into the cabin?"

"Thanks: I will. Where are you bound?"

"For Boston."

"That will just suit me. I can't pay for the passage though. I haven't any money."

"Was your vessel insured?"

"Only about half value."

The two captains and Mr. Henshaw disappeared into the cabin. We waited impatiently.

"I guess he's done for," said Phil.

"Yes; Mr. Henshaw intends to arrest them one at a time, so there will be no fuss," replied the lawyer.

About five minutes after there was a call for Lowell, and a minute after one for Crocker.

"That settles it," said Phil with a grin.

"Were none of the others in it?" asked Mr. Ranson of me.

"I hardly think so."

Just then one of the yacht hands approached us.

"The captain would like to see you in the cabin," he said.

"All of us?" I asked.

"Yes, sir."

So we went down into the cabin, Mr. Ranson first, Phil following, and myself last.

The three prisoners were standing in a row, all heavily handcuffed.

"I demand to know the meaning of this?" Captain Hannock was saying in a voice of pretended indignation.

"It means that you are a prisoner," replied Mr. Henshaw.

"I can see that plainly enough," sneered the captain of the late schooner. "But why?"

"For burning the Spitfire, with a view of obtaining the high insurance upon her."

"Burning the Spitfire! Who ever heard of such a thing!"

And Captain Hannock started back in assumed astonishment.

"We have heard of it; and also of the bogus cargo you carried."

"It's a falsehood!" cried Lowell. "We know nothing of the burning of the schooner. I'm almost certain that boy set her on fire."

"What boy?"

"Luke Foster."

"Did you hire him to do it?"

"Hire him? Do you think I am a fool!" shouted Captain Hannock.

"Perhaps I do. The reason I asked was because I know you started out with the intention of setting fire to the schooner, or destroying her in some way," returned Mr. Henshaw.

"It's false," began Captain Hannock. "The Spitfire was——"

At that instant he stopped short. He had caught sight of us, and his face turned a sickly green. No doubt he felt that for once he had been thoroughly sold.

Lowell and Crocker also noted our entrance. The sailor fell back in a fright. The boatswain turned upon me fiercely.

"You whippersnapper!" he exclaimed. "Where did you come from?"

I offered him no reply, and he went on:

"This is the chap who set the Spitfire on fire."

"We know all about it," said Mr. Henshaw quietly. "For the present you three may consider yourselves under arrest."

"It's an outrage," cried Captain Hannock; but evidently his heart was not in the words.

"I'll risk it."

"You'll be sorry for it," put in Lowell, who was white with rage.

Mr. Henshaw paid no attention to him.

"Where shall we place them?" he asked of Captain Flagg.

"There is no place but an empty coal locker or two."

"That is good enough."

"Put me into a coal locker!" foamed the boatswain.

"Yes, my man. And let me add that I think a coal locker plenty good enough for a man who tries to burn a boy up."

"I won't go!"

"Oh, yes, you will."

"I won't!"

Mr. Henshaw suddenly caught him by the arm. I could see that the clasp was as that of steel.

"See here, I want no more nonsense," he said sternly. "You will do just as I say. Come along."

He marched Lowell off. The rest of us stood guard over Captain Hannock and Crocker.

"You will catch it for this!" said Captain Hannock to Phil.

"Maybe I will," returned the cabin boy. "After this I'm going to look out for myself."

"I'll skin you when I get a chance!"

"But you sha'n't get the chance," I put in; "that is, not if I can help it."

"You! why, do you know who you are?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are Felix Stillwell's nephew."

"And what of that?" I asked, wishing to draw him on.

"Oh, nothing, only you'll be sorry for what you've done."

"As Mr. Henshaw says, I'll risk it," I replied.

"You'll risk it?" he repeated, staring at me strangely.

"Yes, I'll risk it."

"You talk like a fool, Foster."

"Thank you."

"I can place your uncle in a very bad hole."

"How?"

"Never mind, I can, and that's enough."

"Then you'll have to go and do it, that's all."

"Don't you care?" he asked, considerably astonished at my apparent indifference.

"Yes, I care," I replied, honestly. "But if my uncle has done wrong I suppose he'll have to suffer for it."

"Perhaps you don't think much of your uncle," he said, suspiciously.

"I do and I don't. He has not treated me right at times."

"Oh!"

"Of course I hate to see him in company, in any transaction, with you," I added, pointedly.

"Don't crow, Foster," he fumed. "The end hasn't been reached yet."

"Not quite; but we'll be close to it when you are landed in the Boston jail."

This remark made Captain Hannock more angry than ever, and he began to use language that I would not care to remember, much less repeat.

"We'll see," he said at length. "I am not the only one to suffer, when this goes into court. Felix Stillwell will catch it, too!"

"Yes, and I reckon I can put in a word or two against this boy of his," put in Crocker, who had been listening to what was going on.

"You may say what you please," I returned, calmly.

"Say, Captain, didn't that uncle of his send him along to set the Spitfire on fire?" went on the

sailor, suggestively.

"Why, of course he did!" burst out Captain Hannock, caught by the idea. "How else would he happen to be on board?"

I must confess I was rather taken back by this cool assertion.

I was about to reply, when Mr. Ranson caught me by the arm and shook his head.

"Don't waste time talking to him," said the lawyer. "He will do and say what he can to get free, but it will not avail him—he will only twist himself up."

"Will I?" sneered Captain Hannock.

"You will. You had better remain quiet and think over what you'll have to say when you come up for a hearing in court."

In a moment more Mr. Henshaw reappeared, with the information that since Lowell had objected so strongly to the coal locker they had put him in the oil closet (the rankest place on board), and now there were two lockers for the two remaining prisoners.

Despite their protestations, Captain Hannock and Crocker were quickly transferred to their improvised cells. They did not wish to be separated, but Mr. Henshaw would have it no other way.

And then we steamed for Boston harbor.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ON LAND ONCE MORE.

The *Disdain* was a fine yacht, and the morning was all that could be desired. After the prisoners had been disposed of we all went on deck and had a talk over the affair.

I learned that the *Disdain* had been chartered by Mr. Ranson. He had found Captain Flagg without anything to do, a party that was to have gone out for a week's cruise having disappointed him at the last moment. It had not taken long to get the yacht in trim for the trip, and in the mean time the lawyer had hunted up Mr. Henshaw and related the particulars of the case.

The government officer had taken the matter in charge without hesitation. I did not know his exact authority, but Mr. Ranson assured me that it was amply sufficient for the occasion, and on this I rested content.

"What will you do when we arrive in Boston?" the lawyer asked me after a while.

"I don't know, sir. I suppose I will be wanted at the examination."

"Of course."

"The trouble is I haven't any money," I went on, thinking it would be best that my friend should know the exact condition of affairs. "I had four dollars and a half, but Captain Hannock or Lowell took it from me."

"Don't let that worry you," he replied with a smile. "Saving my life was worth considerable to me, and I do not intend to forget it."

"If you will lend me ten or fifteen dollars——" I began.

"You shall have a hundred if you wish."

"I don't want so much. I intend to pay you back."

"You need not, I——"

"I want to, though."

"You can suit yourself. But let me say that I am your friend, and I intend to help you all I can, not only here, but when you reach New York. Your uncle will probably have you arrested as soon as you arrive, unless he has his hands too full of his own affairs, which I am inclined to believe will be so."

"I wish I could get at the bottom of that robbery," I went on earnestly.

"Depend upon it, it will all come out in the end. I have spoken to Henshaw about it, and he says he will give the full particulars to a fellow officer in New York who will willingly work it up."

"You are very kind," was all I could say.

"While you are in Boston you must be my guest," went on Mr. Ranson. "I have a legal connection there as well as in New York, and have rooms at the Ridgerow House."

This conversation relieved me of not a little anxiety. I thanked Mr. Ranson again.

"And now about your companion," he went on. "What do you know concerning him?"

I gave him all the knowledge I possessed. Then Mr. Ranson called Phil aside and had a long talk with him.

"And so you are sick of the sea?" said the lawyer at length.

"Yes, sir; tired of the sight of it," exclaimed Phil. "I'd rather do anything on land than ship as a cabin boy again."

"Well, I'll see what I can do towards getting you a place in some office or store, and until then I'll find you a boarding-house and pay your board."

"But Captain Hannock is my guardian."

"He won't be after he is convicted. Have you any relatives?"

"Only an old aunt down at Lynn."

"Do you like her?"

"Yes, sir; very much. But Captain Hannock would not let me visit her."

"Then she may perhaps become your guardian, and let you live in Boston, or wherever you find a place. I will fix it up for you if you wish."

"Oh, thank you."

And so it was arranged.

"Tell you what," said the cabin boy, when we were alone, "Mr. Ranson's a brick!"

"You're right, Phil," I replied, "and a gold one."

About noon Boston appeared, and shortly after we steamed up the bay. I had never visited the "Hub" before, and the sight was to me a novel and interesting one.

"We will anchor out in the bay, and go ashore in the small boat," said Captain Flagg. "Mr. Henshaw wishes to transact some business before the prisoners are transferred."

"Can we go ashore?" I asked.

"You will have to ask Mr. Henshaw."

"I think you can," said Mr. Ranson. "You do not intend to run away, I believe."

"Not much," I laughed. "My running away days are over. This has turned out very well, but I don't want to try any more."

Presently the government officer came up.

"Of course you can go ashore, and do as you please. Only be on hand at the examination, for you both will be needed as witnesses."

It was not long before the small boat was launched, and quite a party entered. We soon reached the wharf, and in a body proceeded to one of the court buildings, where Mr. Henshaw left us sitting in one of the lower rooms.

He was gone full half an hour.

"Come this way, please," he said on his return, and led the way to an apartment on the second floor.

"Here are the persons, Judge," he said, presenting us to an elderly gentleman sitting in a big chair.

"I know Mr. Ranson very well," was the judge's reply. "Sit down, I wish to ask you a number of questions."

So we all sat down. I was the first witness, and all I had to say was carefully noted. Then Phil Jones and Mr. Ranson followed; and after an hour or more, the judge said he was satisfied.

"I wish all of you to appear here to-morrow morning at ten o'clock," he said, as he dismissed us. "I will not bind any of you over, but will trust to your honor to do as I wish."

This was satisfactory to all hands, and we left. Out on the street Mr. Ranson told Phil to come with him and he would see what he could do for him.

"You can come too, Foster, if you wish," he added.

"I think I would prefer to take a walk around the city," I replied. "It is all new and strange to me."

"Do just as you think best."

Before we separated the lawyer handed me two five-dollar bills. He would have given me a larger

amount, but I did not wish it.

"Don't get lost," was his final remark.

"I'll try not to," I replied.

I did not know one street from another, but walked up and down. To me all seemed quite different from New York, and the time went by swiftly. About the middle of the afternoon I took the cars out to Bunker Hill monument and surrounding places of interest.

I returned at supper time. Mr. Ranson had given me directions for reaching the Ridgerow House, and I found no difficulty in doing so.

I met him in the hall.

"Ah, here you are," he exclaimed. "Come up to the room and get into shape for supper."

He led the way to an elegant room on the second floor.

I was surprised at the sumptuousness of the apartment, and did not hesitate to say so.

"It is nice," he returned. "Certainly far better than my quarters were at Port Jefferson."

"By the way, won't the people be alarmed for your safety?" I asked.

"I have already telegraphed to them."

I washed up and combed my hair. My clothes were none of the best, but they were the best I had, and Mr. Ranson told me I could get another suit the first thing in the morning.

Supper at the hotel was an elegant affair, and both of us did full justice to it.

During the meal I asked what he had done with Phil.

"I have secured him a position in an office down on the wharves," replied the lawyer. "The work just suits him, and the pay, six dollars a week, is, I think, very good to start on. He has written to his aunt telling her to come down upon my invitation. As soon as she arrives I will fix the matter up so that there will be no trouble."

"I think Captain Hannock has some money belonging to him."

"So Philip tells me. I shall bring him to a strict accounting, and make him pay over every penny if he has it."

"I am anxious to get back to New York," I said. "Now I have decided on what to do I am impatient to begin."

"I guess you will be able to start by to-morrow noon. I will try to arrange it with Judge Boyden, so there will be no trouble. But I am sorry I shall not be able to go with you."

"No?" I repeated, in considerable dismay, for I had counted on the lawyer accompanying me.

"Business will keep me in Boston for a week or more. But I have already written to Mr. Ira Mason to take your case in charge."

"Mr. Mason!" I exclaimed.

"Yes. You said you knew him, and he is as good a lawyer as I could get. What do you think of it?"

"I like it very much," I replied.

"I thought you would. I told Mr. Mason to spare no expense to clear you and also to have the subject of your uncle's guardianship investigated. I know he will do what I asked."

"I am sure he will."

"If you wish to follow my advice write at once to this Mr. Banker, whom this Harvey Nottingham of London says was to be your guardian. With what you now know perhaps he may be able to throw some light on the subject."

"I will do so at once," I replied.

As soon as the meal was finished I sat down in the reading-room, and wrote a long letter to Mr. Banker, telling him all that happened, and what a villain I had found Mr. Stillwell to be. I also said that I expected to be in New York the following evening and wished very much he would meet me. I likewise quoted the letter from London, and asked why my father's wish had not been carried out.

"That will do first-rate," said Mr. Ranson, when I showed it to him.

"I think I will take a walk out and post it," I said, for to write the letters had taken over an hour and a half, and I felt somewhat cramped from the work.

"All right. You will find me in the room when you return. Remember it is number 67."

I walked out upon the busy street. It was brightly lighted, and in the evening looked very similar to Fourteenth Street in New York.

I found a mail-box on the corner, and dropped my letter in it.

I was just turning away from the box when I felt a hand on my arm and a cheery voice called out:

"Well, dash my toplights, if it ain't Luke Foster! How under the polar star did you git here, boy?"

I turned swiftly and found that the man who had addressed me so cheerily was none other than Tony Dibble.

"Why, Dibble!" I returned, warmly, and clasped his hand.

"I thought you was on your way to Liverpool."

"I just got in Boston," I returned.

"And where's the Spitfire?"

"At the bottom of the Atlantic, Dibble."

"No!" He stared at me for a moment. "Then the old man——" he began in a whisper.

"Hush! not so loud!" I interrupted. "Somebody may overhear you."

"That's so." He lowered his voice still more. "She was really done for, then?"

"Yes, burned up."

"Too bad! She was an old tub, nothin' better. But I kinder loved her, havin' sailed in her so long. The villains! They ought to be strung up to the yard-arm, every one of 'em!"

"How did you get here?" I asked, curiously.

"Just came up from New Bedford. That there lawyer, Ranson, said I had better come up here and wait till I heard from him. He was going to git a boat and go after the Spitfire."

"He did get a boat, and rescued Phil Jones and I from a raft, after the Spitfire was burned."

"Good for him! And where is the captain now?"

"Locked up."

"What!" roared Tony Dibble, in amazement. "Do you mean to tell me they caught him red-handed?"

"Hardly, but they caught him, and the others, too."

"Good!"

"Mr. Ranson is now stopping at the Ridgerow House, and I am stopping with him."

"Yes, he told me the name of the hotel. I was on the way down there now to see if he had got back."

"Perhaps you can help him as a witness against Captain Hannock," I went on.

"I reckon I can. I ain't a lovin' the captain much, I can tell you."

"I suppose not."

"No, he was a corker to sail under. It was only the old Spitfire that took my eye. But she's gone now——" Tony Dibble wiped the moisture from his eyes. "Too bad! Ought to string 'em up, say I!"

"The law will deal with them, never fear."

Dibble was curious to know the full particulars of the going down of the Spitfire, and walking to a somewhat retired part of the street, I gave them to him. He shook his head over and over again.

"And all my duds a-goin' with her," he said "Who's goin' to pay for them?"

"Captain Hannock ought to."

"So he had! Is that there lawyer at the hotel now?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to see him at once. Coming along?"

"Not just now. I will be back later."

"Just so, Luke; I hope you git justice for bein' left aboard."

And with a shake of his weather-beaten face, Tony Dibble started off for the Ridgerow House.

Then I continued my stroll quite a distance. Some of the shop windows that were still lighted interested me, and before I knew it I had gone a mile, if not more. At length I came to a railroad station. A number of trains had just come in, and a crowd of people were streaming from the various entrances and I stopped to watch them.

Suddenly some one stopped in blank amazement before me.

"So here's where you have been keeping yourself, young man!" were the first words I heard.

Somewhat startled, I looked full at the speaker.

It was my uncle Felix!

"Mr. Stillwell!" I ejaculated.

"Exactly; and you shall not escape me this time!"

And with a very stern face my uncle caught me by the collar.

"Let go of me!" I cried.

"Not much! And don't you dare to try to break away, for if you do I will hand you over to the first policeman that appears!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

MR. FELIX STILLWELL'S MOVE.

I was thoroughly astounded at being confronted by my uncle Felix in Boston. I was under the impression that he was at his place in New York City, and for a moment I did not know what to do.

"Yes, sir, young man, don't you dare to break away, or the first policeman shall have you," he repeated, as he tightened his grasp.

"Let go of my collar!" was all I replied.

"Not a bit of it."

"Yes, you will."

And with a twist I pulled myself loose.

"Police!" he called loudly.

"Keep quiet," said I, "I'm not going to run away."

"Oh-ho! So you've had enough of it," he exclaimed in derision.

"Never mind what I've had. I am not going to run away, that's all."

"Seems to me you are getting mighty independent," he sneered.

"I have a right to be."

He looked at me sharply.

"What do you mean by that?"

"That is my affair."

"Why, you young rascal, I——"

"Hold up, Mr. Stillwell, I'm no rascal."

"Yes, you are! What have you done with that six thousand dollars you took from the safe?"

"I never took six thousand dollars from the safe, and you know it," I returned, with spirit.

As I spoke I noticed my uncle closely, and saw that he turned slightly pale.

"You took that money, Luke. What's the use of denying it longer?"

"You cannot prove it, Mr. Stillwell. I might as well say you took it."

"Why—why—you—you——" he stammered.

"Are you sure the safe contained six thousand dollars?" I went on.

"Of course I am! Didn't Mr. Grinder give me the money only the afternoon before?"

"And you are sure you placed it in the safe?"

"See here, boy; one would suppose I was the one who had committed the crime."

"And why not you as much as me?" I asked, as coolly as I could.

"Do you mean that I didn't place the money in the safe?" he demanded.

"That's just what I do mean."

"You young rascal——"

"Hold up, Uncle Felix, I——"

"I'm not your uncle any more! I disown you."

"I am willing to be disowned. You have not treated me rightly for years; in fact, ever since my father and mother died."

"I've done more for you than you deserved."

"You let me work like a slave for next to nothing. Now, if you think you are going to send me to prison on such a charge as this you are entirely mistaken."

"You come along with me, and you'll soon see."

"I am willing to come along; but you will get the worst of it, mark my words!"

After this we walked along in silence for a few feet. Now that he had me he was evidently at a loss what to do next.

"What brought you to Boston?" I asked, just to see what he would say.

"None of your business!"

"Oh; all right. I wondered how you knew I was here."

"You can keep on wondering."

I supposed I could. My words had evidently completely upset Mr. Stillwell.

"Are you ready to go to New York with me?" he asked suddenly.

I thought a moment. What of the examination in the morning?

"I will if you will let me go to the hotel first," was my reply.

"Been putting up at a hotel, have you? Nice way to live on other people's money!"

"Will you let me go?"

"Yes, but not for long."

"Are you going back to-night?"

"Certainly."

This was somewhat of a surprise to me. I had thought that he intended to wait until the arrival of Captain Hannock with the news of the loss of the Spitfire.

But his next words solved the problem.

"I shall not be satisfied until I have put you under proper care. You are a dangerous boy to have around."

Now it was perfectly clear. He intended to take me to New York, have me locked up, and then return by the next train to Boston. But for once Mr. Stillwell had missed his calculations.

"What hotel are you stopping at?"

"Ridgerow House."

"Humph! mighty fine place for you, it strikes me!"

"It is fine."

Seeing that he could make nothing out of me, he relapsed into silence.

It was not long before we reached the Ridgerow House.

"Is Mr. Ranson in?" I asked of the clerk.

"Yes, sir."

"Will you please send word that I would like to see him in the parlor at once?"

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Stillwell started on hearing the name.

"Whom did you ask for?" he inquired.

I told him.

"Oscar Ranson?"

"Yes, sir."

"What do you want of him?"

"That is my affair."

Mr. Stillwell was much disturbed. He walked up and down impatiently.

"Thought you said you were stopping at this hotel," he demanded.

"So I did."

"This doesn't look like it."

"I occupy a room with Mr. Ranson."

"Where did you meet him?"

"Excuse me, but that is my business."

At this reply my uncle was very angry. He wanted to let loose a flood of bad temper, but did not dare to do so in that public place.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ON THE CARS.

In a few moments Mr. Ranson came down, followed by Tony Dibble. On catching sight of Mr. Stillwell, the lawyer was greatly surprised.

"Mr. Stillwell!" he exclaimed.

"How are you, Ranson," replied my uncle gruffly.

"Pretty well, but I didn't expect——"

"Neither did I."

"I came to see you before going to New York," I broke in hastily. "I met Mr. Stillwell at the depot, and he insists on my accompanying him back at once."

"Indeed!"

"And I wish to speak to you in private before I go," I added, in a whisper.

We walked to one side. Mr. Stillwell was itching to hear what was said, but I gave him no opportunity of doing so.

In a few hurried words I told the lawyer what had happened, and asked his advice.

"Go to New York with him, and keep him there if possible," said Mr. Ranson. "Mr. Henshaw or his agent will be down soon and arrest him. I will fix matters with the judge."

"Shall I say anything to him?"

"No, let Mr. Mason do it for you."

A little more conversation passed between us, and then I announced my readiness to start.

"And good luck go with you," said Mr. Ranson in a voice loud enough for Mr. Stillwell to hear, and it made his nose go up in anger.

"Hope you're done," he snarled.

"Yes, sir, quite finished."

"Then come along."

Mr. Stillwell marched me out of the hotel and down the street without further words.

"Going right to New York?"

"None of your business."

"But it is my business," and I stood still.

"Can't you see we are?" he retorted.

After this hardly a word passed between us. When he arrived at the depot he said sourly:

"I suppose you haven't any ticket?"

"I haven't."

"Have you any money to buy it with?"

"If you want me to go to New York you will have to buy me a ticket," was my reply.

We marched up to the ticket-office, and with very bad grace he purchased me a single ticket.

"When does the train start?" he inquired of the agent.

"In ten minutes."

"That suits. Come on;" the latter to me.

We boarded the train. Mr. Stillwell found a vacant seat in the middle of the car, and insisted on my taking the inside, next the window. Then he placed himself between me and the aisle.

"Now I want none of your fooling," he said, as he settled back.

I made no reply, and we rode on in perfect silence.

I sat awake for a long time. I could not speculate upon what the future held in store for me. I well knew that Mr. Stillwell was a deep one, and I determined to trust him no further than was absolutely necessary.

"When will we reach New York?" I asked.

There was no reply, and turning, I saw that his eyes were closed.

I was pretty sure he was shamming, and to prove it, made a slight movement as if to rise.

Instantly his eyes were wide open.

"No, you don't. Sit down there," he cried.

I repeated my question.

"Not before to-morrow morning."

Then he closed his eyes again, and I did not further disturb him.

Outside of the car all was dark, and as I could not see any of the scenery through which we were passing, the ride soon grew monotonous.

Finally my head began to fall forward; and before I knew it I was fast asleep.

I slept for about an hour. Then I awoke with a start.

Mr. Felix Stillwell's hand was in my coat pocket!

I could hardly believe the evidence of my senses when I found Mr. Stillwell's hand where it was. Was my uncle trying to rob me? I did not open my eyes, but moved slightly to one side, uttering a deep sigh as I did so. Instantly the hand was withdrawn, and when, a moment later, I sat up, I saw that he was lying back as if in the soundest sleep.

There was no more slumber for me that night, and in order to keep awake I sat bolt upright. This evidently did not please my companion, for presently he too sat up and looked at me sharply.

"You might as well go to sleep," he said. "We have a long ride before us. I thought I wouldn't go to the expense of tickets for the sleeping-car."

"I've had a nap," I replied.

"It wasn't very long."

"Long enough."

"Humph!"

My uncle sank back again, but I could see that he was put out. No doubt he had counted upon searching my clothing and finding some clew to what I had done and intended to do.

It was all I could do to keep awake, but I managed to do so with the aid of an early morning paper I bought on the train.

The paper was one from New York that had just come from the metropolis on the three o'clock paper train. I spread it open, and was rather startled to behold the following heading to one of the columns:

SET ON FIRE!

THE SCHOONER SPITFIRE GIVEN OVER TO THE FLAMES.

ARREST OF CAPTAIN HANNOCK FOR TRYING TO DEFRAUD THE INSURANCE COMPANIES.

WAS THE CARGO BOGUS?

And then followed a description of the arrest by Mr. Henshaw, and a harrowing account of two boys (Phil and myself), who had been left on board to be burned, and of the reasons for believing that the cargo was bogus, and that three New York merchants were supposed to be interested in the venture.

Of course the newspaper item was right in some particulars, but it was terribly overdrawn, and I could not help but smile as I read it.

I wondered what Mr. Stillwell would say when he saw it. I determined to keep the paper away from him, it being time enough for him to hear of what had happened when he arrived in New

York.

By the time I had finished reading the train was approaching the upper part of the city.

"Let me see the paper," said Mr. Stillwell.

As he spoke I had the paper rolled up and resting on the sill of the window, which was open. Not wishing to refuse him directly, I gave the sheet a slight shove with my arm, and this sent it fluttering away.

"It's gone," I replied. "It's dropped out of the window."

"You threw it out on purpose," he growled. "Luke, you're getting more uncivil every day."

"We have different opinions about that," I returned, with an air of utter indifference.

I knew he was too close to town to buy a paper then. There would be one at the office and he would wait until he could get that.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BACK IN NEW YORK.

We soon reached the depot, and, leaving it, took an Elevated train down town.

"Now, Luke, for the last and only time, are you going to give up that money?"

My uncle asked me that question as we alighted from the train.

"There is no necessity for your asking that question, Mr. Stillwell," I replied. "I have said all I care to on that subject."

"Do you know what I am going to do with you?"

"Have me locked up, I suppose."

"More than that; I am going to have you sent to the State prison for a number of years. I hate to do it, but it's the only way to manage you."

"Perhaps it won't be an easy matter to send me to prison."

"I have proof enough, never fear."

"I don't think so; and let me say, if you disgrace me by an arrest, I will make it as hot for you as I can."

"You are an angel, I must say."

"I don't pretend to be an angel. I'm nothing but an everyday boy, and I've got a temper just as well as any one. I've always tried to do my duty, both to you and to others, and I can't see why you should suspect me any more than Gus or one of your partners, or—or yourself."

"What!"

"Yes, I mean just what I say. I am not guilty, and I am half inclined to believe you know it."

"You villain!"

"If you have me arrested, I'll make you prove that you put the money in the safe and that Gus didn't take it out."

"You scamp! Do you think that any one will doubt my word?"

"Perhaps they will."

"I have been a well-known citizen here for twelve years; I think not."

"Folks don't all know you as I do. When they hear of some of the things you have done they will think differently."

"What things?"

"Never mind; you'll know soon enough."

Mr. Stillwell was evidently much disturbed. He pursed up his lips savagely.

"You speak as if I had committed some great crime," he cried.

"Maybe you have."

He grew pale for an instant; but quickly recovered himself.

"Don't try to scare me, Luke; it won't work."

"I am not trying to scare you."

"Yes, you are."

"I am only trying to prepare you for what may come."

"I want no help from you."

"Very well; but remember, you will be sorry for what you do."

I said no more, and my uncle did not continue the conversation.

It was not long before we reached Nassau Street. As we passed along I could not help but think of the day I had so unceremoniously left Mr. Banker and my uncle. How much had occurred since that time! What an experience I had had, and how much I had learned!

I speculated upon the time it would take for Mr. Banker to receive my letter and reach New York, and if Mr. Mason had heard from Mr. Ranson and would be ready for my return.

I hoped from the bottom of my heart all would yet be right. I hated the thought of going to jail, even if only for a few hours. I knew the stain would cling.

"What did Mr. Banker do after I left?" I asked.

"None of your business," growled Mr. Stillwell.

"He did not think I was guilty," I went on.

"I don't care what he thought."

"And Mr. Mason; did he think I was guilty?"

"Mr. Mason is a fool—always was."

From this I inferred that my lawyer friend had thought as Mr. Banker did—that I was innocent. This gave me not a little satisfaction.

"How did you come to meet Ranson?" he asked after a pause.

"I might say that it was none of your business——" I began.

"You scamp!"

"But I will not. I saved Mr. Ranson's life."

"Saved his life! I want none of your jokes, please!"

"I am not joking. He says I saved his life, and I am willing to take his word for it."

"How was it?"

"I was on board a boat, and his boat was swamped, so I pulled him on board."

"And so you became friends?"

"Yes, sir."

"Humph! you might have made a better choice!"

"I think Mr. Ranson a very nice man. He certainly treated me extremely well."

"He's of small account."

"He said you and he were not on good terms."

"What did he do for you for saving him?"

"He offered to do a great deal."

"I suppose so. He's mighty free as far as words go."

It made Mr. Stillwell feel sore to think I had so many friends. He knitted his eyebrows and said no more until we reached the office.

When we arrived we found no one but my cousin Gus in charge. Mr. Grinder was still away, and Mr. Canning had not yet arrived.

"Hello! so you're back!" exclaimed Gus. "Thought you'd get sick of running away."

I offered no reply, and he continued:

"What did you mean by insinuating that I took the money from the safe?"

"If you didn't, what were you doing in the office that morning when you said you were going to Coney Island?"

"Who says I was at the office?"

"I do; and I can prove it."

Gus reddened.

"Well, I will own up that I was here, but I didn't go near the safe."

"So you say. But if you didn't, what were you doing here?"

"Don't answer him, Augustus," put in my uncle sternly. "What right have you to cross-question my son?" he demanded, turning to me.

"If he doesn't answer I may have him arrested," was my firm reply.

"What!"

"I mean every word I say."

"Have me arrested!" cried Gus, turning pale.

"Yes."

"I—I came to put the office in disorder so that you would catch it," he faltered. "I tore up some paper and spilt the ink, but I didn't go near the safe."

"It was a mighty small revenge," was my reply.

"I—I—know it. But you stole the money," he continued triumphantly.

"I did not; and you will have a job to prove it."

"We'll do it, never fear. Won't we, pop?"

"I think we will, Augustus. But I fear Luke is in a very unhappy frame of mind. He doesn't seem to realize the enormity of his crime."

"He will when he's behind the bars."

"I trust so."

"I will never realize what I am not guilty of. What are you going to do with me next?"

"Just sit down until I finish the morning mail and you will see. Augustus, watch him so that he does not escape again."

"Don't fear. I told you I would not run away; and I always keep my word."

I sat down on a chair, and Mr. Stillwell began to look over his letters. I wondered what would happen next, but I was not quite prepared for what did happen.

Suddenly the door opened, and Mr. Canning rushed in. He held a morning paper in his hand, and was highly excited.

"What does this mean?" he demanded of my uncle.

"What does what mean, Mr. Canning?" asked Mr. Stillwell, as sweetly as he could.

"This account of the burning of the Spitfire?"

"Dear! dear! the Spitfire burned!" cried my uncle, wringing his hands in assumed anguish. "And I had a cargo on board of her, and but partly insured!"

"Yes; and this paper states that the vessel was set on fire by the captain and his accomplices," went on Mr. Canning.

With a bound my uncle was on his feet.

"It can't be true," he cried, hoarsely.

"The officers of the law claim that it is true. But that is not the worst of it. They claim that the cargo was a bogus one, and that you are guilty of fraud. Foster, here——"

Mr. Canning did not continue. With a deep groan my uncle had sunk back into his office chair like one dead!

CHAPTER XXX.

AN UNEXPECTED DEATH.

I was alarmed when my uncle fell back in his chair as one dead. I knew that his heart was affected, and that any sudden shock might prove serious to him.

"What's the matter?" asked Mr. Canning, starting forward.

"The news has been too much for him," I replied.

"You've killed my father!" cried Gus, white with fear. "He's troubled with his heart, and what you have said has done him up."

"I sincerely trust not," replied the junior partner. "Let us raise him up, and some one go for a doctor."

We made him as comfortable as possible and opened all the doors and windows. Then while Gus hurried off for a physician, Mr. Canning applied his ear to the unconscious man's breast.

"His heart still beats," he exclaimed. "I trust he gets over it."

We procured some water and bathed my uncle's face, and Mr. Canning poured some wine that was in the desk down his throat.

"Is this report true?" he asked as we were doing what we could for the unfortunate man.

"Yes, sir, it is."

The junior partner shook his head.

"I have suspected Mr. Stillwell for some time," he said slowly. "I was not in the firm a week before I was sorry I had invested my money with them."

"Do you think I am guilty?"

"Hardly, Foster; but Mr. Stillwell seemed so positive."

"I don't think the money was ever put in the safe, sir," I went on.

"What makes you think that?"

"Because Mr. Stillwell was not acting rightly about my late father's estate, and as I was beginning to suspect him he wished to get me out of the way."

"Ah, I see! I am afraid he has got himself in a bad fix."

"I am afraid so too, but it is not my fault, Mr. Canning."

A moment later Gus returned with a doctor. The physician shook his head when he beheld my uncle.

"I have been called to attend him once before," he said. "He is not at all strong, and this may prove worse than you imagine."

"Will it be fatal?" I cried.

"I trust not, but I cannot say for certain. The best thing is to get him home where he can have perfect quiet."

At these words Gus began to shed tears. I could not help but feel sorry for him, and also for my aunt and my cousin Lillian when they should hear the news.

I went out and procured the easiest coach I could find, and inside of it we placed Mr. Stillwell, with the physician beside him, and Gus on the seat with the driver.

"Are you coming along?" asked my cousin.

"No; but I will be up later," I replied.

We watched the coach out of sight up the busy street, and then Mr. Canning and I returned to the office.

"It is a bad state of affairs," said the junior partner. "I doubt, after what the doctor has said, if your uncle ever puts foot in the office again."

"I hardly know what to do," I replied.

And to tell the truth, my mind was in a whirl of excitement. The unexpected turn of affairs bewildered me.

While we were discussing matters there was a knock on the door, and Mr. Mason came in.

"What, Foster, back already! I knew you were coming, but did not expect you so soon."

"Did you receive Mr. Ranson's letter?" I asked.

"Yes; and came to have a talk with Mr. Stillwell. Where is he?"

In a few words I told him what had happened. The lawyer was much surprised.

"This will change things a great deal, especially if your uncle does not recover," he said. "I think we ought to go up to the house and see him."

"But he is very ill——" I began.

"All the more reason we should see him. He may have something to say before his death, if this stroke is fatal."

I could not help but shiver at the words. It seemed awful to me that my uncle should die, at such a time, when he was least prepared!

"I'll do whatever you think best, Mr. Mason," I replied.

"Then come. We will go at once. Delays are always dangerous."

In a moment more we were on the way. While seated in the Elevated car he asked me to tell him my whole story, and I did so, just as I have written it here.

"Will you let me see that letter from London?" he asked.

I did so. He read it carefully.

"I believe this Nottingham is right," he said. "I have found that he is a gentleman in good standing, and that counts for much."

"I wish Mr. Banker had been my guardian from the start," I replied.

When we arrived at my uncle's home I found that he had been brought in but ten minutes before. The entire household was in a great state of alarm in consequence.

We met my aunt in the lower hall. No sooner did she catch sight of me than she swooped down upon me.

"You are to blame for all this, Luke Foster," she cried in her shrill voice.

"I can't see how," I replied as calmly as I could.

"You are. You upset him by robbing the safe and then running away."

"I don't think the boy is guilty, madam," put in Mr. Mason. "We all make mistakes, and——"

"There is no mistake here. If my husband dies this boy will be the sole cause."

And without waiting for a reply Mrs. Stillwell swept by us and up the stairs.

I took Mr. Mason into the parlor, a room that I hardly knew, although I had lived in the house about two years. Presently Gus came down the stairs.

"You here!" he exclaimed. "What brought you? Haven't you done harm enough?"

"I don't want to do harm. I thought I might just see your father, and then go away."

"Well, he just asked for you," was Gus's unexpected reply. "But ma said you weren't to be let up."

"If he asked I'm going," I said with a sudden determination.

I ran up the stairs at once. At the head I met Mrs. Stillwell.

"Where are you going?" she asked coldly.

"To see Uncle Felix."

"Well, I guess you are not!"

"Gus says he asked for me."

"I don't care. You shall not see the poor man."

"Excuse me, madam, but I will," I replied, and brushed past her and on to the door of my uncle's room.

She caught me by the arm.

"You just march downstairs!" she cried.

"Is that Luke?" came a feeble voice from within.

"Yes, Uncle Felix," I hastened to reply.

"Let him come in, dear; I must see him."

With a very bad grace Mrs. Stillwell allowed me to enter. At first she was about to follow, but her husband motioned her away, and she was forced to withdraw.

My uncle lay on the bed. His face was deadly white and awfully haggard. He held out his hand.

"I'm glad you've come, Luke," he said, with something that sounded like a sigh. "The doctor tells me I cannot last long."

"Oh, Uncle Felix!"

"Never mind, it is for the best. I have done wrong, and death is better than public disgrace. Did you come alone?"

"No, sir; Mr. Mason is with me."

"Mason!"

"Yes, sir; I asked him to come with me. He is to be my lawyer if I am arrested."

"Do not fear; you will not be. I own up; that money was not stolen. I was afraid you had brought with you the officers of the law. Do you know anything of this—this Spitfire affair?"

"I know all about it. I was on board the vessel when she burned."

"You!"

My uncle was greatly astonished, and he finally persuaded me to tell my story. When I had concluded he asked me to call up Mr. Mason, and I did so.

The three of us were closeted for fully an hour. What took place will be told hereafter.

At the end of the interview my uncle was very weak. The doctor was called in and he revived him, but it was not for long. He died at sundown.

His funeral, three days later, was a large one, made up, not only of mourners, but also of those who came out of curiosity to see the remains of the man who had lived such a double life.

CHAPTER XXXI.

CONCLUSION.

My uncle's deathbed revelation was a strange one. In brief, it was as follows:

At the time my father and mother were killed he was in a sore financial strait, and needed money to keep himself from failing and losing every dollar he possessed.

He had applied to my father for relief, and my parent was about to grant him considerable assistance when the fatal catastrophe occurred.

Mr. Stillwell had immediately taken a steamer for England, and on arriving there, took entire charge of my father's affairs, though not without some difficulty with the English bankers, who held my father's funds in trust.

On examining my father's private papers, my uncle was not a little chagrined to find that Mr. Banker was to be appointed my guardian, there being a will to that effect, a will that Mr. Mason and I afterwards found among Mr. Stillwell's papers.

Mr. Banker was not on good terms with my uncle, so the latter knew that if the former became my guardian the loan that my father had consented to make would most likely never be carried out. In this predicament my uncle had taken his first wrong step. He had hidden my father's will and brought forth an old one in which he himself was named as guardian.

This wrong step accomplished, the rest was easy enough. But my uncle's original intention had been to treat me fairly, just as if Mr. Banker had been my guardian.

Yet in the end the temptation to use the money for his own benefit was too strong for him, and he had ended by losing something like ten thousand dollars out of an estate worth fifty.

It was then that he had met Captain Hannock, who was an old school chum, and been persuaded to go into the scheme that had ended so disastrously. The remainder the reader already knows.

By a paper drawn up by Mr. Mason, Uncle Felix placed the charge of his affairs entirely in the lawyer's hands. Mr. Mason was to settle his estate, pay all that was due to me over to Mr. Banker, my new guardian, and then settle the remainder upon Gus and Lillian, taking out, of course, my aunt's share as his widow.

Although my uncle did not say so, I am pretty well satisfied that much of his wrongdoing was attributable to his wife, who was a very proud and extravagant woman. This, I think, is why he left her no more than he did.

The day before my uncle's funeral Mr. Banker came down to the city. He shook me warmly by the hand and slyly asked me if I had enough of the sea.

"Yes, indeed," I replied. "Life on shipboard is well enough to read about, but the city is good enough for me."

"And what do you propose to do now?" he asked.

"You are my guardian. I suppose I'll have to do as you wish me to."

"No, Luke; you are old enough to choose for yourself."

"Then let me say that I would like to go to college and finish the education my father intended I should have."

"So be it," replied Mr. Banker.

All this happened six years ago. During that time great changes have taken place.

Immediately after my uncle's death my aunt removed to her former home in Boston, taking Gus and Lillian with her. They never write to me or come to New York, and I am content to leave them go their own way.

Captain Hannock and Lowell are both in prison, the former with ten years to serve and the latter five. Crocker was discharged about a month ago. I have never seen any of them since the day they were sentenced in the Boston court-room, and I trust I never shall.

Mr. Oscar Ranson still spends his time between the "Hub" and the metropolis, and in him I have a true friend. Phil Jones has now a responsible position on the wharfs, at a good salary, and as the work just suits him, he will no doubt rise rapidly. His old aunt has become his guardian, and she holds in trust for him two thousand dollars which Captain Hannock was compelled to pay over because it belonged to the cabin boy's late father. Tony Dibble is at sea.

Two years ago, in company with Harry Banker, I finished my course at college, and now I am duly installed in Mr. Mason's office as his private clerk. Having a good home with my employer, I am happy, and that being so, what more is there to say?

THE END.

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JOE, THE SURVEYOR Or The Value of a Lost Claim

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