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Title: The Boy Aviators' Polar Dash; or, Facing Death in the Antarctic

Author: John Henry Goldfrap

Release date: November 1, 2004 [EBook #6973]

Most recently updated: January 10, 2015

Language: English

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BOY AVIATORS' POLAR DASH; OR, FACING DEATH IN THE ANTARCTIC ***

Produced by Paul Hollander, Juliet Sutherland, Ben Byer,

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THE BOY AVIATORS' POLAR DASH

OR

FACING DEATH IN THE ANTARCTIC

BY

CAPTAIN WILBUR LAWTON (pseudonym for John Henry Goldfrap)

Boy Aviators' Series

By Captain Wilbur Lawton

1 THE BOY AVIATORS IN NICARAGUA; or, In League with the Insurgents.

2 THE BOY AVIATORS ON SECRET SERVICE; or, Working with Wireless.

3 THE BOY AVIATORS IN AFRICA; or, An Aerial Ivory Trail.

4 THE BOY AVIATORS' TREASURE QUEST; or, The Golden Galleon.

5 THE BOY AVIATORS IN RECORD FLIGHT; or, The Rival Aeroplane.

6 THE BOY AVIATORS' POLAR DASH; or, Facing Death in the Antarctic.

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THE BOY AVIATORS' POLAR DASH

OR

FACING DEATH IN THE ANTARCTIC

CHAPTER I.

THE POLAR SHIP.

"Oh, it's southward ho, where the breezes blow; we're off for the pole, yo, ho! heave ho!"

"Is that you, Harry?" asked a lad of about seventeen, without looking up from some curious-looking frames and apparatus over which he was working in the garage workshop back of his New York home on Madison Avenue.

"Ay! ay! my hearty," responded his brother, giving his trousers a nautical hitch; "you seem to have forgotten that to-day is the day we are to see the polar ship."

"Not likely," exclaimed Frank Chester, flinging down his wrench and passing his hand through a mop of curly hair; "what time is it?"

"Almost noon; we must be at the Eric Basin at two o'clock."

"As late as that? Well, building a motor sledge and fixing up the Golden Eagle certainly occupies time."

"Come on; wash up and then we'll get dinner and start over."

"Will Captain Hazzard be there?"

"Yes, they are getting the supplies on board now."

"Say, that sounds good, doesn't it? Mighty few boys get such a chance. The South Pole,—ice-bergs—sea-lions,—and—and—oh, heaps of things."

Arm in arm the two boys left the garage on the upper floor of which they had fitted up their aeronautical workshop. There the Golden Eagle, their big twin-screw aeroplane, had been planned and partially built, and here, too, they were now working on a motor-sledge for the expedition which now occupied most of their waking—and sleeping—thoughts.

The Erie Basin is an enclosed body of water which forms at once a repair shop and a graveyard for every conceivable variety of vessel, steam and sail, and is not the warmest place in the world on a chill day in late November, yet to the two lads, as they hurried along a narrow string-piece in the direction of a big three-masted steamer, which lay at a small pier projecting in an L-shaped formation, from the main wharf, the bitter blasts that swept round warehouse corners appeared to be of not the slightest consequence—at least to judge by their earnest conversation.

"What a muss!" exclaimed Harry, the younger of the two lads.

"Well," commented the other, "you'd hardly expect to find a wharf, alongside which a south polar ship is fitting up, on rush orders, to be as clean swept as a drawing-room, would you?"

As Harry Chester had said, the wharf was "a muss." Everywhere were cases and barrels all stenciled "Ship Southern Cross, U. S. South Polar Expedition." As fast as a gang of stevedores, their laboring bodies steaming in the sharp air, could handle the muddle, the numerous cases and crates were hauled aboard the vessel we have noticed and lowered into her capacious holds by a rattling, fussy cargo winch. The shouts of the freight handlers and the sharp shrieks of the whistle of the boss stevedore, as he started or stopped the hoisting engine, all combined to form a picture as confused as could well be imagined, and yet one which was in reality merely an orderly loading of a ship of whose existence, much less her destination, few were aware.

As the readers of *The Boy Aviators in Record Flight*; or, *The Rival Aeroplane*, will recall, the Chester boys, in their overland trip for the big newspaper prize, encountered Captain Robert Hazzard, a young army officer in pursuit of a band of renegade Indians. On that occasion he displayed much interest in the aeroplane in which they were voyaging over plains, mountains and rivers on their remarkable trip. They in turn were equally absorbed in what he had to tell them about his hopes of being selected for the post of commander of the expedition to the South Pole, which the government was then considering fitting out for the purpose of obtaining meteorological and geographical data. The actual attainment of the pole was, of course, the main object of the dash southward, but the expedition was likewise to do all in its power to add to the slender stock of the world's knowledge concerning the great silences south of the 80th parallel. About a month before this story opens the young captain had realized his wish and the Southern Cross—formerly a staunch bark-rigged whaler—had been purchased for uses of the expedition.

Their friend had not forgotten the boys and their aeroplane and in fact had lost no time in communicating with them, and a series of consultations and councils of war had ended in the boys being signed on as the aviators of the expedition. They also had had assigned to their care the mechanical details of the equipment, including a motor sledge, which latter will be more fully described later.

That the consent of the boys' parents to their long and hazardous trip had not been gained without a lot of coaxing and persuasion goes without saying. Mrs. Chester had held out till the last against what she termed "a hare-brained project," but the boys with learned discourses on the inestimable benefits that would redound to humanity's benefit from the discovery of the South Pole, had overborne even her rather bewildered opposition, and the day before they stood on the wharf in the Erie Basin, watching the Southern Cross swallowing her cargo, like a mighty sea monster demolishing a gigantic meal, they had received their duly signed and witnessed commissions as aviators to the expedition—documents of which they were not a little proud.

"Well, boys, here you are, I see. Come aboard."

The two boys gazed upward at the high side of the ship from whence the hail had proceeded. In the figure that had addressed them they had at first no little difficulty in recognizing Captain Hazzard. In grimy overalls, with a battered woolen cap of the Tam o' Shanter variety on his head, and his face liberally smudged with grime and dust,—for on the opposite side of the Southern Cross three lighters were at work coaling her,—a figure more unlike that of the usually trim and trig officer could scarcely be imagined.

The lads' confusion was only momentary, however, and ended in a hearty laugh as they nimbly ascended the narrow gangway and gained the deck by their friend's side. After a warm handshake, Frank exclaimed merrily:

"I suppose we are now another part of the miscellaneous cargo, sir. If we are in the way tell us and we'll go ashore again."

"No, I've got you here now and I don't mean to let you escape," laughed the other in response; "in my cabin—its aft there under the break in the poop, you'll find some more overalls, put them on and then I'll set you both to work as tallyers."

Harry looked blank at this. He had counted on rambling over the ship and examining her at his leisure. It seemed, however, that they were to be allowed no time for skylarking. Frank, however, obeyed with alacrity.

"Ay, ay, sir!" he exclaimed, with a sailor-like hitch at his trousers; "come, Harry, my hearty, tumble aft, we might as well begin to take orders now as any other time."

"That's the spirit, my boy," exclaimed the captain warmly, as Harry, looking a bit shamefaced at his temporary desire to protest, followed his brother to the stern of the ship.

Once on board there was no room to doubt that the Southern Cross had once been a whaler under the prosaic name of Eben A. Thayer. In fact if there had been any indecision about the matter the strong smell of oil and blubber which still clung to her, despite new coats of paint and a thorough cleaning, would have dispelled it.

The engine-room, as is usual in vessels of the type of the converted whaler, was as far aft as it could be placed, and the boys noticed with satisfaction as they entered the officers' quarters aft, that the radiators had been connected with the boilers and had warmed the place up to a comfortable temperature. A Japanese steward showed them into Captain Hazzard's cabin, and they selected a suit of overalls each from a higgledy-piggledy collection of oil-skins, rough pilot-cloth suits and all manner of headgear hanging on one of the cabin bulkheads.

They had encased themselves in them, and were laughing at the whimsical appearance they made in the clumsy garments, when the captain himself entered the cabin.

"The stevedores have knocked off for a rest spell and a smoke and the lighters are emptied," he announced, "so I might as well show you boys round a bit. Would you care to?"

Would they care to? Two hearty shouts of assent left the young commander no doubt on this score.

The former Eben A. Thayer had been a beamy ship, and the living quarters of her officers astern left nothing to be desired in the way of room. On one side of the cabin, extending beneath the poop deck, with a row of lights in the circular wall formed by the stern, were the four cabins to be occupied by Captain Hazzard, the chief engineer, a middle-aged Scotchman named Gavin MacKenzie, Professor Simeon Sandburr, the scientist of the expedition, and the surgeon, a Doctor Watson Gregg.

The four staterooms on the other side were to be occupied by the boys, whom the lieutenant assigned to the one nearest the stern, the second engineer and the mate were berthed next to them. Then came the cabin of Captain Pent Barrington, the navigating officer of the ship, and his first mate, a New Englander, as dry as salt cod, named Darius Green. The fourth stateroom was empty. The steward bunked forward in a little cabin rigged up in the same deck-house as the galley which snuggled up to the foot of the foremast.

Summing up what the boys saw as they followed their conductor over the ship they found her to be a three-masted, bark-rigged vessel with a cro' nest, like a small barrel, perched atop of her mainmast. Her already large coal bunkers had been added to until she was enabled to carry enough coal to give her a tremendous cruising radius. It was in order to economize on fuel she was rigged for the carrying of sail when she encountered a good slant of wind. Her forecastle, originally the dark, wet hole common to whalers, had been built up till it was a commodious chamber fitted with bunks at the sides and a swinging table in the center, which could be hoisted up out of the way when not in use. Like the officers' cabins, it was warmed by radiators fed from the main boilers when under way and from the donkey, or auxiliary, boiler when hove to.

Besides the provisions, which the stevedores, having completed their "spell," were now tumbling into the hold with renewed ardor, the deck was piled high with a strange miscellany of articles. There were sledges, bales of canvas, which on investigation proved to be tents, coils of rope, pick-axes, shovels, five portable houses in knock-down form, a couple of specially constructed whale boats, so made as to resist any ordinary pressure that might be brought to bear on them in the polar drift, and nail-kegs and tool-chests everywhere.

Peeping into the hold the boys saw that each side of it had been built up with big partitions,

something like the pigeon-holes in which bolts of cloth are stored in dry-goods shops—only much larger. Each of these spaces was labeled in plain letters with the nature of the stores to be placed there so that those in charge of the supplies would have no difficulty in laying their hands at once on whatever happened to be needed. Each space was provided with a swiveled bar of stout timber which could be pulled across the front of the opening in heavy weather, and which prevented anything plunging out.

Captain Hazzard explained that the heavy stores were stowed forward and the provisions aft. A gallery ran between the shelves from stem to stern and provided ready access to any part of the holds. A system of hot steam-pipes had been rigged in the holds so that in the antarctic an equable temperature could be maintained. The great water tanks were forward immediately below the fore-castle. The inspection of the engines came last. The Southern Cross had been fitted with new water-tube boilers—two of them—that steamed readily on small fuel consumption. Her engine was triple expansion, especially installed, as the boilers had been, to take the place of the antiquated machinery boasted by the old Thayer.

"Hoot, mon, she's as fine as a liner," commented old MacKenzie, the "chief," who had taken charge of the boys on this part of their expedition over the vessel, which was destined to be their home for many months.

"Some day," said Frank, "every vessel will be equipped with gasoline motors and all this clumsy arrangement of boilers and complicated piping will be done away with."

The old Scotch engineer looked at him queerly.

"Oh, ay," he sniffed, "and some day we'll all go to sea in pea-soup bowls nae doot."

"Well, a man in Connecticut has built a schooner out of cement," declared Harry.

The engineer looked at him and slowly wiped his hands on a bit of waste.

"I ken his head must be a muckle thicker nor that," was his comment, at which both the boys laughed as they climbed the steel ladders that led from the warm and oily regions to the deck. The engineer, with a "dour" Scot's grin, gazed after them.

"Hoots-toots," he muttered to his gauges and levers, "the great ice has a wonderful way with lads as cocksure as them twa."

CHAPTER II.

A MYSTERIOUS ROBBERY.

Their inspection of the Southern Cross completed, the delighted boys accompanied Captain Hazzard back to the main cabin, where he unfolded before them a huge chart of the polar regions.

The chart was traced over in many places with tiny red lines which made zig-zags and curves over the blankness of the region south of the eightieth parallel.

"These lines mark the points reached by different explorers," explained the captain. "See, here is Scott's furthest south, and here the most recent advance into south polar regions, that of Sir Ernest Shackleton. In my opinion Shackleton might have reached his goal if he had used a motor sledge, capable of carrying heavy weights, and not placed his sole dependence on ponies."

The boys nodded; Frank had read the explorer's narrative and realized that what Captain Hazzard said was in all probability correct.

"It remains for your expedition to carry the Stars and Stripes further to the southward yet," exclaimed Frank, enthusiastically, as Captain Hazzard rolled up the map.

"Not only for us," smiled the captain; "we have a rival in the field."

"A rival expedition?" exclaimed Frank.

"Exactly. Some time this month a Japanese expedition under Lieutenant

Saki is to set out from Yokahama for Wilkes Land.

"They are to be towed by a man-of-war until they are in the polar regions so as to save the supply of coal on the small steamer they are using," went on the captain. "Everything has been conducted with the utmost secrecy and it is their intention to beat us there if possible—hence all this haste."

"How did our government get wind of the fact that the Japs are getting ready another expedition?" inquired Frank, somewhat puzzled.

"By means of our secret service men. I don't doubt that the Japanese secret service men in this country have also notified their government of our expedition. England also is in the race but the Scott expedition will not be ready for some time yet."

"You think, then, that the Japs have secret agents keeping track of us?" was Frank's next question.

The captain's reply was cut short by a loud crash. They all started up at the interruption. So intent had they been in their conversation that they had not noticed the Jap steward standing close behind them and his soft slippers had prevented them hearing his approach. The crash had been caused by a metal tray he had let drop. He now stood with as much vexation on his impassive countenance as it ever was possible for it to betray.

"What on earth are you doing, Oyama?" sharply questioned Captain Hazzard.

"I was but about to inquire if the cap-it-an and the boys would not have some refreshments," rejoined the Jap.

"Not now, we are busy," replied Captain Hazzard, with what was for him some show of irritation. "Be off to your pantry now. I will ring if I want you."

With an obsequious bow the Jap withdrew; but if they could have seen his face as he turned into his small pantry, a cubby-hole for dishes and glasses, they would have noticed that it bore a most singular expression.

"It seems curious that while we were talking of Jap secret service men that your man should have been right behind us," commented Frank. "I don't know that I ought to ask such a question—but can you trust him?"

The captain laughed.

"Oh, implicitly," he said easily, "Oyama was with me in the Philippines, and has always been a model of all that a good servant should be."

Soon after this the conference broke up, the boys having promised to have their aeroplane on board early the next day. Frank explained that the machine was all ready and in shape for shipping and all that remained to do was to "knock it down," encase it in its boxes and get a wagon to haul it to the pier.

"Say, Harry," said Frank earnestly, as the boys, having bade their leave of Captain Hazzard, who remained on board owing to press of business on the ship, made their way along the maze of wharves and toward a street car.

"Say it," responded Harry cheerfully, his spirits at the tip-top of excitement at the idea of an almost immediate start for the polar regions.

"Well, it's about that Jap."

"Oh that yellow-faced bit of soft-footed putty—well, what about him?"

"Well, that 'yellow-faced bit of putty,' as you call him, is not so easily dismissed from my mind as all that. I'm pretty sure that he had some stronger reason than the one he gave for coming up behind us as silently as a cat while we were talking."

"But Captain Hazzard says that he has had him for years. That he can trust him implicitly," protested Harry.

"Just the same I can't get it out of my mind that there is something wrong about the fellow. I wish he hadn't seen that map and the proposed route of our expedition."

"Oh bosh, you are thinking of what Captain Hazzard said about the Jap secret service. Our friend Oyama is much too thick to be a secret service man."

"He simply looks unimpressive," rejoined Frank. "For that reason alone he would make a good man for any such purpose."

"Well, here comes a car," interrupted Harry, "so let's board it and forget our Japanese friend. Depend upon it you'll find out that he is all O. K. long before we sight an iceberg."

"I hope so, I'm sure," agreed Frank; but there was a troubled look on his face as he spoke.

However, not later than the next morning, as they were screwing up the last of the big blue cases that contained the various parts of the Golden Eagle, Billy Barnes, the young reporter who had accompanied the two boys in all of their expeditions, including the one to Nicaragua, where, with their aeroplane they helped make Central American history, as related in *The Boy Aviators in Nicaragua*; or, *Leagued with the Insurgents*,—Billy Barnes, the irrepressible, bounced into the garage which they used as a workshop, and which was situated in the rear of their house on Madison Avenue, with what proved to be important news of the Jap.

"Aha, my young Scotts and Shackletons, I behold you on the verge of your departure for the land of perpetual ice, polar bears and Esquimaux," exclaimed the reporter, striking an attitude like that assumed by Commander Peary in some of his pictures.

"Hullo, Billy Barnes," exclaimed both boys, continuing their work, as they were pretty well used to the young reporter's unceremonious calls, "What brings you out so early?"

"Oh, a little story to cover in the Yorkville Court and I thought as I was up this way I'd drop off and pay my respects. Say, bring me back a polar bear skin, will you?"

"A polar bear skin?" laughed Frank, "why there aren't any polar bears at the South Pole."

"No polar bears," repeated Billy lugubriously, "what's the good of a pole without polar bears. Me for the frozen north then. I suppose you'll tell me next there are no natives at the South Pole either."

"Well, there are not," rejoined Frank.

"But there are sea-elephants and ice-leopards and—" began Harry.

"And sea-cats, I suppose," interrupted Billy.

"No," exclaimed Harry, rather nettled at the young reporter's joking tone, "but there is the ship of Olaf—"

Frank was up like a shot.

"Didn't we give our word to the Captain not to mention a word about that?" he demanded.

"That's so," assented Harry, abashed, "but I just wanted to show this young person here that he can't treat our expedition with levity."

"The ship of Olaf, eh?" mused the young reporter, "sounds like a story. Who was Olaf, if I may ask?"

"You may not ask," was Frank's rejoinder. "As you know, Billy, we have been frank with you, of course under the pledge of secrecy which we know you too well to dream of your breaking. You know we are bound for the South Polar regions. You know also that the object of Captain Hazzard is to discover the pole, if possible; in any event to bring back scientific data of inestimable value; but there's one thing you don't know and of which we ourselves know very little, and that is the thing that Harry let slip."

"All right, Frank," said the young reporter, readily, "I won't say any more about it, only it did sound as if it had possibilities. Hullo! ten o'clock; I've got to be jogging along."

"What are you going to court about?" inquired Frank.

"Oh, a small case. Doesn't look as if it would amount to a row of pins. A Jap who was arrested last night, more for safe-keeping than anything else, I guess. He was found near the consulate of his country and appeared to be under the influence of some drug. Anyhow, he couldn't look after himself, so a policeman took him to a station-house. Of course, there might be a story back of it and that's why I'm on the job."

"A Jap, eh?" mused Frank curiously.

"Yes; do you number any among your acquaintance?" inquired Billy.

"Well, we do number one; don't we, Harry?" laughed Frank.

At that moment the telephone bell rang sharply in the booth erected in the workshop in order to keep out noise when anyone was conversing over the wire.

"Wait a second, I'll see what that call is," exclaimed Frank, bolting into the booth. He was in it several seconds and when he came out his face was flushed and he seemed excited.

"What's the matter—trouble?" inquired Billy, noting his apparent perturbation.

"Yes, it is trouble in a way," assented Frank, "I guess we'll take a run to court with you and look over this Jap of yours, Billy."

"Think you know him?"

"That's just what I want to see."

"You seem very anxious about it. Anything wrong?"

"Yes, very wrong. That was Captain Hazzard on the wire, and a mysterious theft has occurred on the Southern Cross."

CHAPTER III.

OFF FOR THE SOUTH POLE.

The court-room was crowded as the boys entered it, but armed with Billy's police card they soon made their way through a rail that separated the main body of the place from the space within which the magistrate was seated. On the way over Frank had related his conversation over the wire with Captain Hazzard. It appeared that Oyama, the Jap, was missing and that several papers bearing on the objects of the expedition which were,—except in a general way,—a mystery to the boys themselves, had been stolen.

Putting two and two together, Frank had made up his mind that the Jap whose case Billy had been assigned to investigate was none other than Oyama himself, and as they entered the space described above his eyes eagerly swept the row of prisoners seated in the "Pen."

"I was sure of it," the boy exclaimed as his eyes encountered an abject, huddled-up figure seated next a ragged, besotted-looking tramp.

"Sure of what?" demanded Harry.

"Why, that Oyama was the man who stole the papers from the Southern Cross."

"Well?"

"Well, there he is now."

Frank indicated the abject object in the corner who at the same moment raised a yellow face and bloodshot eyes and gazed blearily at him. There was no sign of recognition in the face, however. In fact the Jap appeared to be in a stupor of some sort.

"Is that little Jap known to you?"

Frank turned: a gray moustached man with a red face and keen eyes was regarding him and had put the question.

"He is—yes," replied the boy, "but——"

"Oh, you need not hesitate to talk to me," replied the stranger, "I am Dr. McGuire, the prison surgeon, and I take a professional interest in his case. The man is stupefied with opium or some drug that seems to have numbed his senses."

"Do you think it was self-administered?" asked the boy.

"Oh, undoubtedly. Those fellows go on regular opium debauches sometimes. In this case perhaps it is

very fortunate for some one that he was imprudent enough to take such heavy doses of the drug that the policeman picked him up, for a lot of papers were found on him. They are meaningless to me, but perhaps you can throw some light on them."

"The papers, we believe, are the property of Captain Hazzard, the head of the government's South Polar expedition," exclaimed Frank, whose suspicions had rapidly become convictions at the sight of the Jap. "We have no right to examine into their contents, but I suppose there would be no harm in our looking at them to make sure. I can then notify the Captain."

"You are friends of his?"

"We are attached to the expedition," replied Frank, "but I must ask you not to mention it, as I do not know but we are breaking our promise of secrecy even in such an important matter as this."

"You can depend that I shall not violate your confidence," promised Dr. McGuire.

It was the matter of few moments only to secure the papers from the court clerk. There was quite a bundle of them, some of them sealed. Apparently the thief, elated over his success in stealing them, had indulged himself in his beloved drug before he had even taken the trouble to examine fully into his finds. One paper, however, had been opened and seemed to be, as Frank could not help noticing, a sort of document containing "General Orders" to the expedition.

It consisted of several closely typewritten pages, and on the first one Frank lit on the magic words,—"**—AND CONCERNING THE SHIP OF OLAF, THE VIKING ROVER, YOU WILL PROCEED ACROSS THE BARRIER, USING ALL DISCRETION, AS A RIVAL NATION HAS ALSO SOME INKLING OF THE PRESENCE OF THE LONG-LOST VESSEL AND,—**"

Though the boy would have given a good deal to do so he felt that he could not honorably read more. He resolutely, therefore, closed the paper and restored it to its place in the mass of other documents. There was, of course, no question that the papers were the property of Captain Hazzard, and that the Jap had stolen them. The latter was therefore sentenced to spend the next six weeks on Blackwell's Island, by the expiration of which time the Southern Cross would be well on her voyage toward The Great Barrier.

As the boys left the court, having been told that Captain Hazzard's papers would be sealed and restored him when he called for them and made a formal demand for their delivery, they were deep in excited talk.

"Well, if this doesn't beat all," exclaimed Frank, "we always seem to be getting snarled up with those chaps. You remember what a tussle they gave us in the Everglades."

"Not likely to forget it," was the brief rejoinder from Harry.

"I'll never forget winging that submarine of Captain Bellman's," put in Billy.

"Well, boys, exciting as our experiences were down there, I think that we are on the verge of adventures and perils that will make them look insignificant," exclaimed Frank.

"Don't," groaned Billy.

"Don't what?"

"Don't talk that way. Here am I a contented reporter working hard and hoping that some day my opportunity will come and I shall be a great writer or statesman or something and then you throw me off my base by talking about adventure," was the indignant response.

"Upon my word, Billy Barnes, I think you are hinting that you would like to come along."

"Well, would that be so very curious. Oh cracky! If I only could get a chance."

"You think you could get a leave of absence?"

"Two of 'em. But what's the use," Billy broke off with a groan, "Captain Hazzard wouldn't have me and that's all there is to it. No, I'll be stuck here in New York while you fellows are shooting Polar bears—oh, I forgot, there aren't any,—well, anyhow, while you're having a fine time,—just my luck."

"If you aren't the most contrary chap," laughed Frank. "Here a short time ago you never even dreamed of coming and now you talk as if you'd been expecting to go right along, and had been meanly

deprived of your rights."

"I wonder if the Captain—," hesitated Harry.

"Would take Billy along?" Frank finished for him, "well, we will do this much. We have got to go over to the Erie Basin now and tell Captain Hazzard about the recovery of his papers. Billy can come along if he wants and we will state his case for him, it will take three boys to manage that sledge anyway," went on Frank, warming up to the new plan. "I think we can promise you to fix it somehow, Billy."

"You think you can," burst out the delighted reporter, "oh, Frank, if you do, I'll—I'll make you famous. I'll write you up as the discoverer of the ship of Olaf and—"

"That's enough," suddenly interrupted Frank, "if you want to do me a favor, Billy, never mention any more about that till Captain Hazzard himself decides to tell us about it. We only let what we know of the secret slip out by accident and we have no right to speculate on what Captain Hazzard evidently wishes kept a mystery till the time comes to reveal it."

"I'm sorry, Frank," contritely said Billy, "I won't speak any more about it; but," he added to himself, "you can't keep me from thinking about it."

As Frank had anticipated, Captain Hazzard agreed to ship Billy Barnes as a member of the expedition. He was to be a sort of general secretary and assist the boys with the aeroplane and motor sledge when the time came. The reporter's face, when after a brief conference it was announced to him that he might consider himself one of the Southern Cross's ship's company, was a study. It was all he could do to keep from shouting at the top of his voice. The contrast between the dignity he felt he ought to assume before Captain Hazzard and the desire he felt to skip about and express his feelings in some active way produced such a ludicrous mixture of emotions on Billy's face that both the boys and the captain himself had to burst into uncontrollable laughter at it. Laughter in which the good natured Billy, without exactly understanding its cause, heartily joined.

A week later the final good-byes were said and the Southern Cross was ready for sea. She was to meet a coal-ship at Monte Video in the Argentine Republic which would tow her as far as the Great Barrier. This was to conserve her own coal supply. The other vessel would then discharge her cargo of coal,—thus leaving the adventurers a plentiful supply of fuel in case the worst came to worst, and they were frozen in for a second winter.

In case nothing was heard of them by the following fall a relief ship was to be despatched which would reach them roughly about the beginning of December, when the Antarctic summer is beginning to draw to a close. The commander of the Southern Cross expected to reach the great southern ice-barrier in about the beginning of February, when the winter, which reaches its climax in August, would be just closing in. The winter months were to be devoted to establishing a camp, from which in the following spring—answering to our fall—the expedition would be sent out.

"Hurray! a winter in the Polar ice," shouted the boys as the program was explained to them.

"And a dash for the pole to cap it off," shouted the usually unemotional Frank, his face shining at the prospect.

As has been said, the Southern Cross was an old whaler. Built rather for staunchness than beauty, she was no ideal of a mariner's dream as she unobtrusively cleared from her wharf one gray, chilly morning which held a promise of snow in its leaden sky. There were few but the stevedores, who always hang about "the Basin," and some idlers, to watch her as she cast off her lines and a tug pulled her head round till she pointed for the opening of the berth in which she had lain so long. Of these onlookers not one had any more than a hazy idea of where the vessel was bound and why.

As the Southern Cross steamed steadily on down the bay, past the bleak hills of Staten Island, on by Sandy Hook, reaching out its long, desolate finger as if pointing ships out to the ocean beyond, the three boys stood together in a delighted group in the lee of a pile of steel drums, each containing twenty gallons of gasoline.

"Well, old fellow, we're off at last," cried Frank, his eye kindling as the Southern Cross altered her course a bit and stood due south down the Jersey coast.

"That's it," cried Billy, with a wave of his soft cap, "off at last; we're the three luckiest boys on this globe, I say."

"Same here," was Harry's rejoinder.

The blunt bows of the Southern Cross began to lift to the long heave of the ever restless Atlantic. She

slid over the shoulder of one big wave and into the trough of another with a steady rhythmic glide that spoke well for her seaworthy qualities. Frank, snugly out of the nipping wind in the shelter of the gasoline drums, was silent for several minutes musing over the adventurous voyage on which they were setting out. Thus he had not noticed a change coming over Harry and Billy. Suddenly a groan fell on his ear. Startled, the boy looked round.

On the edge of the hatch sat Billy and beside him, his head sunk in his hands, was Harry.

"What's the matter with you fellows?" demanded Frank.

At that instant an unusually large breaker came rolling towards the Southern Cross and caught her fair and square on the side of the bow. Deep laden as she was it broke over her and a wall of green water came tumbling and sweeping along the decks. Frank avoided it by leaping upward and seizing a stanchion used to secure the framework holding down the deck load.

But neither Harry nor Billy moved, except a few minutes later when another heavy roll sent them sliding into the scuppers.

"Come, you fellows, you'd better get up, and turn in aft," said Frank.

"Oh, leave me alone," groaned Billy.

"I'm going to die, I think," moaned Harry.

At this moment the new steward, a raw boy from Vermont, who had been at sea for several years, came up to where the two boys were suffering.

"Breakfast's ready," he announced, "there's some nice fat bacon and fried eggs and jam and——"

It was too much. With what strength they had left Billy and Harry tumbled to their feet and aimed simultaneous blows at him.

It was a final effort and as the Southern Cross plunged onward toward her mysterious goal she carried with her two of the most sea-sick boys ever recorded on a ship's manifest.

CHAPTER IV.

A MESSAGE FROM THE AIR.

It was a bright, sunshiny morning a week later. The Southern Cross was now in sub-tropic waters, steaming steadily along under blue skies and through smooth azure water flecked here and there with masses of yellow gulf weed.

The boys were in a group forward watching the flying fish that fled like coveys of frightened birds as the bow of the polar ship cut through the water. Under Dr. Gregg's care Billy and Harry had quite recovered from their sea-sickness.

"Off there to the southeast somewhere is the treasure galleon and the Sargasso Sea," said Harry, indicating the purplish haze that hung on the horizon. [Footnote: See Vol. 4 of this series, *The Boy Aviators' Treasure Quest*; or, *The Golden Galleon*.]

"Yes, and off there is the South Pole," rejoined Frank, pointing due south, "I wish the old Southern Cross could make better speed, I'm impatient to be there."

"And I'm impatient to solve some of the mystery of this voyage," put in Billy, "here we've been at sea a week and Captain Hazzard hasn't told us yet anything about that—that,—well you know, that ship you spoke about, Frank."

"He will tell us all in good time," rejoined the other, "and now instead of wasting speculation on something we are bound not to find out till we do find it out, let's go aft to the wireless room and polish up a bit."

The Southern Cross carried a wireless apparatus which had been specially installed for her polar

voyage. The aerals stretched from her main to mizzen mast and a small room, formerly a storeroom, below the raised poop containing the cabins had been fitted up for a wireless room. In this the boys had spent a good deal of time during their convalescence from sea-sickness and had managed to "pick-up" many vessels within their radius,—which was fifteen hundred miles under favorable conditions.

Frank was the first to clap on the head-receiver this morning and he sat silently for a while absently clicking out calls, to none of which he obtained an answer. Suddenly, however, his face grew excited.

"Hullo," he cried, "here's something."

"What?" demanded Harry.

"I don't know yet," he held up his hand to demand silence.

"That's queer," he exclaimed, after a pause, in which the receiver had buzzed and purred its message into his ear.

The others looked their questions.

"There's something funny about this message," he went on. "I cannot understand it. Whoever is calling has a very weak sending current. I can hardly hear it. One thing is certain though, it's someone in distress."

The others leaned forward eagerly, but their curiosity was not satisfied immediately by Frank. Instead his face became set in concentration once more. After some moments of silence, broken only by the slight noise of the receiver, he pressed his hand on the sending apparatus and the Southern Cross's wireless began to crackle and spit and emit a leaping blue flame.

"What's he sending?" asked Billy, turning to Harry.

"Wait a second," was the rejoinder. The wireless continued to crackle and flash.

"Cracky," suddenly cried Harry, "hark at that, Billy."

"What," sputtered the reporter, "that stuff doesn't mean anything to me. What's he done, picked up a ship or a land station or what?"

"No," was the astounding response, "he's picked up an airship!"

"Oh, get out," protested the amazed Billy.

"That's right," snapped Frank, "as far as I can make out it's a dirigible balloon that has been blown out to sea. They tried to give me their position, and as near as I can comprehend their message, they are between us and the shore somewhere within a radius of about twenty miles."

"Are they in distress?" demanded Billy.

"Yes. The heat has expanded their gas and they fear that the bag of the ship may explode at any moment. They cut off suddenly. The accident may have occurred already."

"Why don't they open the valve?"

"I suppose because in that case they'd stand every chance of dropping into the sea," responded Frank, disconnecting the instrument and removing the head-piece. "I have sent word to them that we will try to rescue them, but I'm afraid it's a slim chance. I must tell Captain Hazzard at once."

Followed by the other two, Frank dashed up the few steps leading to the deck and unceremoniously burst into the captain's cabin where the latter was busy with a mass of charts and documents in company with Captain Barrington, the navigating commander.

"I beg your pardon," exclaimed Frank, as Captain Hazzard looked up, "but I have picked up a most important message by wireless,—two men, in an airship, are in deadly peril not far from us."

The two commanders instantly became interested.

"An airship!" cried Captain Hazzard.

"What's that!" exclaimed Captain Barrington. "Did they give you their position?" he added quickly.

"Yes," replied the boy, and rapidly repeated the latitude and longitude as he had noted it.

"That means they are to the west of us," exclaimed Captain Barrington as the boy concluded. He hastily picked up a speaking tube and hailed the wheel-house, giving instructions to change the course. He then emerged on deck followed by Captain Hazzard and the boys. The next hour was spent in anxiously scanning the surrounding sea.

Suddenly a man who had been sent into the crow's nest on the main mast gave a hail.

"I see something, sir," he cried, pointing to the southwest.

"What is it," demanded the captain.

"Looks like a big bird," was the response.

Slinging his binoculars round his neck by their strap, Captain Barrington himself clambered into the main shrouds. When he had climbed above the cross-trees he drew out his glasses and gazed in the direction the lookout indicated. The next minute he gave a shout of triumph.

"There's your dirigible, boys," he exclaimed, and even Billy overcame his dislike to clambering into the rigging for a chance to get a look at the airship they hoped to save.

Viewed even through the glasses she seemed a speck, no larger than a shoe button, drifting aimlessly toward the south, but as the Southern Cross drew nearer to her she stood out in more detail. The watchers could then see that she was a large air craft for her type and carried two men, who were running back and forth in apparent panic on her suspended deck. Suddenly one of them swung himself into the rigging and began climbing up the distended sides of the big cigar-shaped gas bag.

"What can he be going to do?" asked Captain Hazzard.

"I think I know," said Frank. "The valve must be stuck and they have decided now that as we are so near they will take a chance and open it and risk a drop into the sea rather than have the over-distended bag blow up."

"Of course. I never thought of that," rejoined the captain, "that's just what they are doing."

"That man is taking a desperate chance," put in Professor Simeon Sandburr, who had climbed up and joined the party and looked with his long legs and big round glasses, like some queer sort of a bird perched in the rigging. "Hydrogen gas is deadly and if he should inhale any of it he would die like a bug in a camphor bottle."

Interest on board the Southern Cross was now intense in the fate of the dirigible. Even the old chief engineer had left his engines and wiping his hands with a bit of waste, stood gazing at the distressed cloud clipper.

"The mon moost be daft," he exclaimed, "any mon that wud go tae sea in sic a craft moost be daft. It's fair temptin' o' providence."

At that instant there was a sharp and sudden collapse of the balloon bag. It seemed to shrivel like a bit of burned paper, and the structure below it fell like a stone into the ocean, carrying with it the man who had remained on it. Of the other, the one who had climbed the bag, not a trace could be seen. Even as the onlookers gazed horror-stricken at the sudden blotting out of the dirigible before their eyes the loud roar of the explosion of its superheated gas reached their ears.

"Every pound of steam you've got, chief," sharply commanded Captain Barrington, almost before the dirigible vanished, "we must save them yet."

The old engineer dived into his engine room and the Southern Cross, with her gauges registering every pound of steam her boilers could carry, rushed through the water as she never had before in all her plodding career.

"Heaven grant we may not be too late," breathed Captain Hazzard, as, followed by the boys, he clambered out of the rigging. "If only they can swim we may save them."

"Or perhaps they have on life-belts," suggested Billy.

"Neither will do them much good," put in a voice at his elbow grimly.
It was Professor Sandburr.

"Why?" demanded Frank, "we will be alongside in a few minutes now and if they can only keep up we can save them."

"The peril of drowning is not so imminent as another grave danger they face," spoke the professor.

"What's that?"

"Sharks," was the reply, "these waters swarm with them."

CHAPTER V.

A TRAGEDY OF THE SKIES.

It was soon evident that the two men were supporting themselves in the water. Their heads made black dots on the surface beneath which the heavy deck structure of the dirigible had vanished. Through the glasses it could be seen that they were swimming about awaiting the arrival of the vessel which was rushing at her top speed to their aid.

Soon the Southern Cross was alongside and a dozen ropes and life buoys were hastily cast over the side. But even as one of the men grasped a rope's end he gave a scream of terror that long rang in the boys' ears.

At the same instant a huge, dark body shot through the water and then there was a whitish gleam as the monster shark turned on its back with its jaws open displaying a triple row of saw-like teeth.

"Quick, shoot him," cried Captain Hazzard.

But nobody had a rifle or revolver. Frank hastily darted into his cabin for his magazine weapon but when he reappeared there was only a crimson circle on the water to mark where the terrible, man-killing shark had vanished with his prey. Attracted, no doubt, by the mysterious sense that tells these sea tigers where they can snap up a meal, other dark fins now began to cut through the water in all directions.

The second man, almost overcome by the horror of his companion's fate, however, had presence of mind enough to grasp a rope's end. In a few seconds he had been hauled to the vessel's side and several of the crew were preparing to hoist him on board when two of the monsters made a simultaneous rush at him, Frank's revolver cracked at the same instant and the sea tigers, with savage snaps of their jaws, which, however, fell short of their intended prey, rolled over and vanished.

The rescued man when hauled on deck was a pitiable object. But even in his half famished condition and with the great beard that he wore there was something very familiar—strangely so—about him to the boys. Frank was the first to solve the mystery.

"Ben Stubbs," he exclaimed.

"Who's that that called Ben Stubbs," exclaimed the man over whom a dozen sailors and the doctor had been bending.

"It's me," shouted Frank, regardless of grammar, "Frank Chester."

The amazement on the face of the old salt who had accompanied the boys in Africa and the Everglades and shared their perils in the Sargasso Sea, was comical to behold.

"Well, what in the name of the great horn-spoon air you boys doing here," he gasped, for Harry and Billy had now come forward and were warmly shaking his hand.

"Well, answer us first: what are you doing here?" demanded Frank.

"Coming mighty near my finish like my poor mate," was the reply.

"Perhaps your friend had better come in the cabin and have something to eat while he talks," suggested Captain Hazzard to the boys.

All agreed that that would be a good idea and the castaway was escorted to the cabin table on which Hiram Scroggs the Vermonter soon spread a fine meal.

"Wall, first and foremost," began Ben, the meal being dispatched, "I 'spose you want to know how I

come to be out here skydoodling around in a dirigible?"

"That's it," cried Billy.

"It's just this way," resumed the old sailor drawing out his aged pipe. "Yer see, my pardner, James Melville,—that's the poor feller that's dead,—and me was trying out his new air-craft when we got blown out ter sea. We'd been goin' fer two days when you picked up the wireless call for help he was sending out. I used ter say that wireless was a fool thing ter have on an air-ship, but I owe my life ter it all right.

"Ter go back a bit, I met Melville soon after we got back from the treasure hunt. He was a friend of my sister's husband and as full of ideas as a bird dog of fleas. But he didn't have no money to carry out his inventions and as I had a pocketful I couldn't exactly figure how to use, I agreed to back him in his wireless dirigible. We tried her out several times ashore and then shipped her to Floridy, meaning to try to fly to Cuba. But day afore yesterday while we was up on a trial flight the wind got up in a hurry and at the same moment something busted on the engine and, before we knew where we was, we was out at sea."

"You must have been scared to death," put in Professor Sandburr who was an interested listener.

"Not at first we wasn't. Poor Melville in fact seemed to think it was a fine chance to test his ship. He managed to tinker up the engine after working all night and part of yesterday on it and as we had plenty to eat and drink on board—for we had stocked the boat up preparatory to flying to Cuba—we didn't worry much.

"Howsomever, early this morning, after we'd had the engine going all night we found we was still in the same position and for a mighty good reason—one of the blades of the propeller had snapped off and there we were,—practically just where we'd been the night before and with no chance doing anything but drift about and wait for help. Melville never lost his nerve though.

"'We'll be all right, Ben,' says he to me, and though I didn't feel near so confident, still I chirped up a little for I had been feeling pretty blue, I tell you.

"Right after we had had a bite to eat he starts in hammering away at the wireless, sending out calls for help while I just sat around and hoped something would turn up. Some observations we took showed that we had not drifted very much further from land in the night on account of there being no wind. This looked good for it meant that we were, or should be, in the path of ships. The only thing that worried me was that mighty few coasting vessels carry wireless, and I was surprised when we got an answer from what I knew later was the Southern Cross.

"It was just as Melville was getting your answer that I noticed the bag. The air had grown hot as an oven as the sun rose higher and about noon I looked up just to see if there wasn't a cloud in the sky that might mean a storm, and perhaps a change of wind that maybe would blow us back over land again. What I saw scared me. The bag was blown out as tight as the skin of a sausage, and it didn't look to me as if it could swell much more without busting.

"I pointed it out to Melville and he went up in the air—worried to death.

"'The gas is expanding,' he explains, 'it's the sun that's doing it. If we don't let some gas out we'll bust.'

"And if we do we'll drop into the sea," says I.

"'Yes, that's very likely,' he replied, as cool as a cucumber, 'when the evening comes and the gas condenses, with what we've lost, if we pull the valve open, we won't have enough to keep the ship in the air.'

"'There's only one thing to do,' he went on, 'we must wait till this ship I've been speaking to by wireless comes in sight. Then we'll take a chance. If the worst comes to worst we can float about till they pick us up.'

"That seemed a good plan to me and I never gave the sharks a thought. But when you drew near and it seemed as if the bag was going to bust in a second's time and we tried to open the valve—we couldn't. The halliards that work it had got twisted in the gale that blew us out to sea and they wouldn't come untangled.

"Melville takes a look at the pressure gauge. Then he gave a long whistle.

"'If we don't do something she'll bust in five seconds,' he says.

"Then I suddenly made up my mind. Without saying a word to him I kicked off my boots and started to climb into the rigging.

"What are you going to do?" asked Melville.

"Open that valve, says I.

"We saw you climbing and could not imagine what you were doing," put in Billy.

"Wall," continued the old sailor, "I managed fine at first, although that tar gas sausage was stretched as smooth and tight as a drum. The network around it gave me a foothold though, and once I was half-way round the lower bulge of the bag—where I was clinging on upside down,—I was all right.

"I had the valve lever in my hand and was just going to open it when I felt everything cave in around me like something had been pulled from under my feet—or as if I had been sitting on a cloud and it had melted.

"The dirigible had blown up.

"Luckily I kept my wits about me and deliberately made a dive for the sea. It was a good height but I struck it clean. Down and down I went till I thought I'd never come up again. My ear-drums felt like they'd bust and my head seemed to have been hit with an axe. But come up I did eventually as you know, and found poor George Melville there, too. Of the dirigible there was not so much of as a match-stick left. The rest you know."

Ben's voice shook a little as he reached the latter part of his narrative. The rugged sailor's face grew soft and he winked back a tear. The others said nothing for a few seconds and then Captain Hazzard looked up.

"Since you have become one of us in such a strange way, I presume you would like to know where we are bound for?"

"Wall, if it ain't askin' too much I would," rejoined the rugged adventurer.

"We are bound for the South Pole."

Ben never flicked an eyelid.

"Ay, ay, sir," was all he said.

"I have a proposition to make to you," continued the captain. "We need a bos'n, will you sign on? If you do not care to we will put you ashore at the first convenient port or hail a homeward-bound ship and have you transferred."

The old sailor looked positively hurt.

"What; me lose an opportunity to see the South Pole, to shoot Polar bears—"

"There aren't any," put in Billy.

"Wall, whatever kind of critters there are there," went on the old man, "no, sir; Ben Stubbs ain't the man to hold back on a venture like this. Sign me on as bos'n, and if I don't help nail Uncle Sam's colors to the South Pole call me a doodle-bug."

"A doodle-bug," exclaimed Professor Sandburr, "What kind of a bug is that? If you know where to find them I hope you will catch one and forward it to me."

Ben grinned.

"I guess doodle-bugs is like South Polar bears," he said.

"How is that, my dear sea-faring friend?"

"There ain't any," laughed Ben, blotting his big, scrawling signature on the ship's books.

On and on toward the Pole plied the Southern Cross. One night when she was about two hundred miles at sea off the mouth of the Amazon, the boys, as it was one of the soft tropical nights peculiar to those regions, were all grouped forward trying to keep cool and keeping a sharp lookout for the real Southern Cross. This wonderful, heavenly body might be expected to be visible almost any night now, Captain Hazzard had told them. Old Ben shared their watch.

The little group was seated right on the forefoot or "over-hang" of the polar ship, their legs dangling over the bow above the water. Beneath their feet they could see the bright phosphorous gleam as the ship ploughed onward. They were rather silent. In fact, except for desultory conversation, the throb of the engines and the regular sounding of the ship's bell as it marked the hours were the only sounds to be heard.

It was past eight bells and everyone on the ship but the helmsman had turned in, leaving the boys and Ben on watch, when there came a terrific shock that caused the vessel to quiver and creak as if she had run bow on into solid land. Captain Hazzard was thrown from his bunk and all over the vessel there was the wildest confusion.

Shouts and cries filled the air as Captain Hazzard, not able to imagine what had happened rushed out on deck in his night clothes. The sky had become overcast and it was terribly black. It was hardly possible for one to see his hand before his face. A heavy sulphurous smell was in the air.

"What is it? What has happened? Did we hit another ship?" shouted Captain Barrington, appearing from his cabin.

The helmsman could give no explanation. There had been a sudden shock and he had been knocked off his feet. What had struck the ship or what she had struck he could not make out. Captain Barrington knew there were no rocks so far out at sea and he also knew that he could not be near land. The only explanation was a collision with another ship, but had that been the case surely, he argued, they would have heard shouts and cries on the other vessel.

"Send forward for the boys and Ben Stubbs, they had the watch," he commanded.

A man hurried forward to execute his order but he was soon back with a white scared face.

"The young lads and Bos'n Stubbs aren't there," he exclaimed in a frightened tone.

"Not there," repeated Captain Hazzard.

"No, sir. Not a trace of them. Beggin' your pardon, sir, I think it's ghosts."

"Don't talk nonsense," sharply commanded his superior. "Have the ship searched for them."

"Very good, sir," and the man, with a tug at his forelock, hastened away to spread the word.

But a search of every nook and cranny of the ship only added to the mystery.

Neither the boys nor Ben were to be found.

Had ghosts indeed snatched them into aerial regions, as some of the more superstitious men seemed inclined to believe they could not have vanished more utterly.

CHAPTER VI.

A STRANGE COLLISION.

We must now turn back and ascertain what has become of our young adventurers and their rugged old companion. We left them sitting on the bow—or rather perched there in positions none too secure in case of a sudden lurch of the ship.

"I smell land," had been Ben's sudden exclamation after one of the prolonged silences which, as has been said, possessed them that night.

The boys laughed.

"Laugh away," declared Ben, "but I do. Any old sailor can tell it."

"But we are two hundred miles at sea," objected Frank.

"Don't make no difference, I smell land," stubbornly repeated the old sailor.

"Maybe the wind is off shore and that's the reason," suggested Billy.

"A sensible suggestion, youngster," approved Ben. "I guess that is the reason for there is no island in this part of the world that I ever heard tell of. But say," he broke off suddenly, "what's come over the weather. It's getting black and the stars are blotted out. There's a storm brewing and a bad one, or I'm mistaken."

The boys agreed that there did seem to be every indication of an approaching tropical disturbance of some kind. The air had suddenly grown heavy and sulphurous. There was an oppressive quality in it.

"I'm going aft to tell the captain that there's a bad blow coming on or I'm a Dutchman," exclaimed Ben, starting to scramble to his feet.

"Better hold onto that stay or you'll topple overboard," warned Frank, as Ben, balancing himself, got into a standing posture.

"What me, an old sailor topple over," shouted Ben, "Not much younker, why I—"

The sentence was never finished. At that instant the shock that had aroused Captain Hazzard and terrified the whole ship's company hurled him headlong into the night and the boys, balanced as they were on the prow of the trembling ship, were shot after him into the darkness as if they had been hurled out of catapults.

Frank's feelings as he fell through the darkness he could not afterward describe, still less his amazement when, instead of falling into the sea, fully prepared to swim for his life, he found himself instead plunged into a sticky ooze. For several seconds, in fact, he was too amazed to utter a sound or move. It seemed he must be dreaming.

Then he extended his hands and almost gave a cry so great was his amazement.

He had encountered an unmistakable tree trunk!

He was on land—not dry land—for the boy was mired to the knees in sticky mud,—but nevertheless land. Land in midocean.

Hardly had he recovered from his first shock of surprise when he heard a voice exclaim:

"Can anyone tell me am I awake or dreaming in my bunk?"

"What's the matter, Billy?" hailed Frank, overjoyed to know that one at least of his comrades was safe.

Before Billy could reply Harry's voice hailed through the darkness.

"I'm up to my neck in mud. Where are we, anyhow?"

"We're on dry land in midocean, shiver my timbers if we ain't," came a deep throated hail, which proceeded from Ben Stubbs.

"Thank heaven we are all safe anyhow," cried Frank, "this mud is mighty uncomfortable, though."

"Well, if it hadn't been here we'd have been eaten by sharks by this time," Billy assured them; an observation all felt to be true.

"Where can the ship be?" exclaimed Harry's voice suddenly.

"Miles off by this time," said Frank. "I don't suppose they have even missed us and even if they have it's so black they could never find us."

"Let's see where we are," suggested Ben, "anyhow I'm going to try to get out of this mud. It's like a pig-pen."

His observation struck the boys as a good suggestion and they all wallowed in a direction they deemed was forward and soon were rewarded for their efforts by finding themselves on real dry land. By stretching out their hands they could feel tree trunks and dense brush all about them.

"It's no dream," declared Frank, "we are really on land. But where?"

"Maybe the ship was way off her course and we are stranded on the coast of Brazil," suggested Harry.

"Not likely," corrected Ben, "and besides if we'd hit land the ship would be ashore."

"Then what can we be on?" demanded Frank.

"Give it up," said Billy.

"Anybody got a match?" asked Frank.

Luckily there were no lack of these and as the boys carried them in the waterproof boxes they had used on their previous expeditions they were dry. Some were soon struck and a bonfire built of the brush and wood they found about them.

It was a strange tropical scene the glare illuminated. All about were palm trees and tropic growth of various kinds; many of the plants bearing fruits unfamiliar to the boys. Some large birds, scared by the light, flapped screaming out of the boughs above them as the bonfire blazed up. They could now see that they had been pitched out of the ship onto a muddy beach, the ooze of which stuck to their clothes like clay. The spot in which they stood was a few feet above the sea level.

"Well, there's no use trying to do anything till daylight," said Frank, "we had better sleep as well as we can and start out to try and find a house of some sort in the morning."

All agreed this was a good plan and soon they were wrapped in slumber. Frank's sleep was restless and broken, however, and once or twice he had an uneasy feeling that something or somebody was prowling about the "camp." Once he could have sworn he saw a pair of eyes, like two flaming points of fire, glare at him out of the blackness; but as it was not repeated, he assured himself that it was only his nervous imagination and composed himself to sleep once more.

A sharp thunder storm raged above them shortly before daybreak and they were compelled to seek what shelter they could under a fallen tree trunk. The storm was the one that had blackened the sky some hours before. Luckily it was as short as it was sharp, and when the sun rose it showed them a scene of glistening tropic beauty.

But the boys had little eye for scenery.

"What are we going to do for breakfast?" was Billy's manner of voicing the general question that beset them all after they had washed off some of the mud of the night before.

"Tighten our belts," grinned Harry.

"Not much; not while them oysters is there waiting to be picked," exclaimed Ben pointing to some branches which dipped in the sea and to which bunches of the bivalves were clinging.

"I've got some biscuits in my pocket," said Frank, "I brought them on deck with me last night in case I got hungry on watch."

"Well, we'll do fine," cheerfully said Ben, as having heated some stones he set the oysters to broil on them.

Despite his cheerful tone, however, not one of the little party was there that did not think with longing regrets of the snowy linen and bountiful meals aboard the Southern Cross.

Breakfast over, Ben announced that the first thing to do was to try to find out where they could be. It was agreed for this purpose to advance along the beach for five miles or so in opposite directions, the group being formed into two parties for the purpose. Harry and Frank paired off in one party and Ben Stubbs and Billy formed the other. They were to meet at noon or as soon thereafter as possible and compare notes.

Frank and Harry tramped resolutely along the beach under a baking hot sun till they felt as if they were going to drop, but they held pluckily on, fortunately having found several springs along their line of march.

From time to time they eagerly scanned the expanse of sparkling sea that stretched before them; but it was as empty of life as a desert.

"Do you suppose the ship will make a search for us?" asked Frank.

"How can we tell," rejoined his brother, "they will have found out we are gone by this time and will naturally conclude that we fell overboard and were drowned or eaten by sharks."

Both agreed that such was probably likely to be the fact and that if the coast on which they were cast away proved to be uninhabited their situation might be very serious.

"On the other hand, the ship may have gone down after the collision," suggested Harry, "how she ever came to graze this land and then escape I can't make out."

"I've been puzzling over that, too," replied Frank, "there's a lot that's very mysterious about this whole thing. The Southern Cross is, as you know, equipped with a submarine bell which should give warning when she approaches shallow water. Why didn't it sound last night?"

"Because there must be deep water right up to this coast," was the only explanation Harry could offer.

"That's just it," argued his brother. "But what is a coast doing here at all. We are two hundred miles out in the South Atlantic, or rather, we were last night."

"The charts don't show any land out there, do they?"

"Not so much as a pin point. Some of the deepest parts of the ocean are encountered there."

"Then the ship must have been off her course."

"It seems impossible. She is in charge of experienced navigators. Her compasses and other instruments are the most perfect of their kind."

"Maybe it is a dream after all, and we'll wake up and find ourselves in our bunks," was all Harry could say.

Before Frank could find anything to reply to this extraordinary suggestion he gave a sudden tense cry of:

"Hark!"

Both boys stopped and above their quick breathing they could hear the beating of their hearts.

Human voices were coming toward them.

Luckily Frank had his revolver, having been using it the day before in shooting at huge turtles that floated lazily by. He had by a lucky oversight neglected to take it off when he had finished his target practice, merely thrusting it back into its holster. He drew the weapon now, and grasping Harry by the arm pulled him down beside him into a clump of brush.

"We'll hide here till we see who it is coming," he said.

CHAPTER VII.

ADRIFT ON A FLOATING ISLAND.

The voices grew nearer and suddenly to his amazement Frank heard his own name mentioned. The next moment both lads broke into a loud exclamation of surprise.

Those approaching their place of concealment were Billy Barnes and Ben Stubbs.

It would be difficult to say which pair of adventurers were more astonished as they met on the beach.

"Shiver my timbers!" exclaimed Ben, "whar did you boys come from? Did you turn back?"

"Turn back?" echoed Frank, "no, we've been keeping right on."

"Wall," drawled Ben, "then what I was afeard of at first is true."

"What's that, Ben?"

"Why, that we are on an island."

"On an island!"

"Yes, a floating island."

For a moment they were all dumb with amazement. Then Ben went on:

"I've heard old sailors tell of such things off of this yer coast. These islands—as they are called—are nothing more or less than huge sections of forest torn from the banks of the Amazon when it is in flood and floated out ter sea on its current."

"But how can they keep afloat?" asked Harry.

"Why the tangled roots and tree limbs keep 'em up for a long time," rejoined Ben, "and then they sink."

"I hope our island isn't sinking," exclaimed Frank, anxiously looking about him.

"Not much fear of that; but it's moving, all right," replied the old sailor, "just fix your eyes on that cloud for a minute."

The boys did as directed, and, sure enough, the island, as they now knew it, was moving slowly along, doubtless urged by some current of the ocean.

"Suppose the ship never finds us," gasped Billy.

"Now, just put thoughts like that out of your head, youngster," exclaimed Ben sharply. "I've been in worse fixes than this and got out of them. What we had best do now is to gather up some of those big cocoanuts that's scattered about there and make waterholders out of them."

"But there's plenty of water flowing from the springs. We passed several of them," objected Harry.

"That's just the water that has soaked into the ground after the rain," said Ben. "It will soon dry up as the day goes on."

The adventurers at once set to work gathering up cocoanuts and with their knives scooping out their shells so as to form sort of pots out of them. These were filled with water at the nearest of the little springs and placed in the shade.

"Now to gather some more oysters and we'll have dinner," said Ben, when the boys had filled what he pronounced to be a sufficient number of the improvised pots.

The boys set to work at the task at once, stripping from the low hanging branches the oysters that clung to them. These were roasted in the same manner as the previous night and washed down with water and coconut milk.

"Well, we shan't starve for a while, anyhow," said Ben, as they concluded their meal. "If the worst comes to the worst I guess we can live on cocoanuts for a while."

After some talk about their situation and the prospects of their being rescued from it Ben announced that he was going to explore the interior of the island and see if he could find some tree up which it would be possible to swarm and attach a sort of signal or at any rate obtain an extended view of the sea.

The boys, who felt tired and dispirited, said that they would remain in the camp—if camp it could be called.

Ben had been gone perhaps half an hour, when they were aroused by a sudden shout. At the sound they all sprang to their feet from the restful postures they had assumed.

There was a note of terror in the cry.

"Help, boys, help!"

The sound rang through the forest and then died away, as if the shouter had been suddenly silenced.

"It's Ben," shouted Frank.

"What can have happened?" gasped Harry.

"He is in trouble of some kind," shouted Billy Barnes.

"Come on, boys," exclaimed Frank, drawing his revolver, "get your knives ready, we may need all the weapons we have."

They plunged into the forest in the direction from which they judged the cries had proceeded and after a few minutes pushing through the dense brush, which greatly hampered their progress, they heard a tremendous noise of breaking tree limbs and a violent threshing about as if some huge body was rushing through the woods.

"What can it be?" gasped Frank, his face pale at the sound of the struggle.

In almost the same breath his question was answered. Pushing aside some brush the boys saw before them a small glade or clearing.

In the midst of this stood Ben, his face transfixed with horror and brandishing a seaman's knife.

Facing him, and seemingly about to dart forward, was the largest serpent they had ever seen; the sunlight checkered its bright colored folds. Its red tongue darted wickedly in and out as it faced the brave seaman.

"Shoot, Frank. Shoot and kill it," implored Harry.

With a white, tense face the elder boy leveled his revolver. He pulled the trigger and, before the sharp report that followed had died away, the monstrous, snake was threshing its huge body about in agony.

But as they started to cheer the effect of the shot a cry of horror broke from the boys. In its struggles the monster had convulsed its folds till Frank, who was caught off his guard, was within their reach.

In a second he was wrapped in the giant reptile's grip without having time to utter even an outcry.

Powerless, with only their puny knives with which to give battle to the serpent, the boys stood petrified with terror. Even Ben, to whom his rescue and Frank's peril had been unfolded so swiftly that he was half-dazed, seemed unable to determine what to do.

But indecision only held for a moment. Then with a cry he jumped forward and picked up Frank's revolver, which the boy had dropped when the serpent seized him. With a prayer on his lips the old sailor fired.

Almost with the rapidity of a single bullet the whole contents of the automatic's magazine poured out and every missile took effect in the reptile's huge head. In its death agony it straightened out its folds and Frank's senseless body dropped from them, seemingly limp and lifeless.

The boys started to rush in, but Ben held them back with a warning hand.

"Hold on; it may not be dead yet," he warned.

But a brief inspection proved that the great snake had succumbed to Ben's fusillade and, this settled, they dragged Frank to a low bank, where the extent of his injuries could be ascertained.

"No bones broken," pronounced Ben, after a careful examination. It was not long before the boy opened his eyes and in a short time he declared he felt as well as ever.

The serpent on being measured with Frank's pocket rule proved to be a trifle over twenty feet long and of great girth.

"It's an anaconda," said Ben, "there are lots of 'em up along the Amazon and they are as deadly a snake as there is. I've heard tell they can crush a horse in their folds."

"I hope there are no more of them on the island," exclaimed Billy.

"We shall have to be careful," rejoined Ben, "there may be other dangerous creatures here, too. This island, as I should judge, must be all of six miles around and there's room for a lot of ugly critters in that space."

Leaving the dead body of the snake the adventurers made their way back to camp. The first thing that all wanted was a drink of water. They made for the place in which the drinking fluid had been left.

As soon as his eyes fell on the row of improvised water pots Frank gave an exclamation of dismay.

"Look here," he shouted, "there's some one on this island besides ourselves."

"What!" was the amazed chorus.

"There must be," went on the lad, "see here, there were twenty cocoanut shells of water when we

went away, and now there are only fifteen."

"Five gone!" exclaimed Ben in an alarmed voice, "and the spring has already dried up."

"Hullo! What's that?" suddenly cried Billy, as something came crashing through the branches.

The next moment one of the missing shells was rolled with great violence into the middle of the group of adventurers. Before they had recovered from their astonishment a strange sharp scream filled the forest. There was a derisive note in its tones.

A strange fear filled the boys' hearts. Their faces paled.

"The island is haunted!" shouted Ben.

CHAPTER VIII.

CAUGHT IN THE FLAMES.

"Nonsense," said Frank, sharply, although he had been considerably startled by the inexplicable occurrence himself, "you know there are no such things as ghosts, Ben."

"And if there were they wouldn't throw cocoanut shells at us," went on Harry.

"Wall," said Ben, stubbornly, "what else could it have been?"

"A wild man," suggested Billy; "perhaps a whole tribe of them."

This was not a pleasant suggestion. Frank had but a few cartridges left and the others had only their knives. These would be small protection against savages if any of the forest dwellers had really gone adrift on the floating island. It was not a cheerful party that sat down to another meal of oysters and fruit that evening. Moreover the water supply of the little party was almost exhausted and without water they faced a terrible death.

Because of the unknown dangers which, it was felt, surrounded them it was decided to set a watch that night and keep the fire burning through the dark hours. Harry and Ben were to share the first watch and Frank and Billy agreed to take the second one. Nothing had occurred when Ben, at midnight, aroused Frank and the young reporter and told them it was time to go on duty.

The boys had been on sentry duty for perhaps an hour with nothing but the lapping of the waves against the shore of the floating island to break the deep stillness, when suddenly both were startled by a strange and terrible cry that rang through the forest.

With beating hearts they leaped to their feet and strained their ears to see if they could ascertain the origin of the uncanny cry, but they heard nothing more.

Hardly had they resumed their places by the fire, however, before the wild screams rang out again.

"It's some human being," cried Frank.

"They are being killed or something!" cried the affrighted Billy Barnes.

By this time Ben Stubbs and Harry had awakened and were sitting up with scared looks on their faces.

"Seems to come from near at hand," suggested Ben.

Suddenly the yell sounded quite close, and at the same instant it was echoed by the boys as a dozen or more dark forms dashed out of the dark shades of the forest and rushed toward them. Half unnerved with alarm at this sudden and inexplicable attack, Frank fired point-blank into the onrush, and two of the dark forms fell. Their comrades, with the same wild shrieks that had so alarmed the boys, instantly turned and fled, awakening the echoes of the woods with their terrifying clamor.

"A good thing I killed those two," cried Frank; "throw some wood on the fire, Ben, and we'll see who or what it is that I've shot."

In the bright blaze the adventurers bent over the two still forms that lay on the ground as they had fallen.

"Why, they're great apes!" exclaimed Frank in amazement; "what monsters!"

"Howling monkeys, that's what they call 'em," declared Ben, "I've heard of 'em. No wonder we were scared, though. Did you ever hear such cries?"

"I wonder why they attacked the camp?" asked Billy.

"I don't suppose it was an attack at all," said Frank, "most likely they smelled the food and thought they'd come and help themselves to some broiled oysters."

"I'll bet it was the monkeys that took our water and then threw the shells at us," cried Harry.

"I guess you are right, boy," said Ben; "them monkeys are terrors for mischief."

"I hope they don't take it into their heads to annoy us any more," said Harry.

"Not likely," declared Ben, "I guess the firing of the revolver and the sight of them two mates of theirs falling dead scared them out of two years' growth."

Ben's surmise was right. The adventurers passed the remainder of the night in peace.

As soon as day broke over a sea unmarred by a single ripple, there was an eager scrutiny of the horizon by all the castaways, but to their bitter disappointment not a sign of the Southern Cross, or any other vessel, could be descried.

"Looks like we'll have to spend some more time on 'Monkey Island'," said Ben with a shrug.

"We can't spend much more time," said Frank, grimly.

"Why not?" demanded Ben.

"What are we to do for water?"

Things did, indeed, look black. Breakfast was eaten in comparative silence, and after the meal was concluded, at Frank's suggestion, it was decided to explore the island for a spring that could be tapped for further water supply. The boys all admitted to themselves that the chance of finding one was remote, but they determined to try and locate one in any event. At any rate Frank felt it would keep their minds off their troubles to have something to do.

The best part of the morning was spent in the search and although they came across occasional dribblets of water,—the remnants of springs started by the heavy rain that marked their first night on the island,—they found nothing that promised an available supply. At noon they sat down in the shade of a huge palm to rest and made a meal off the nuts that lay at its foot. The milk of these proved cool and refreshing and was drunk out of the shell after one end of it had been hacked off with Frank's hunting knife.

"Well, we might as well make a start back for our camp," suggested Frank, after some moments had passed in silence.

"Camp," repeated Harry, bitterly, "that's a fine camp. Why, there's nothing there but trees and sand and howling monkeys."

Nevertheless a start was made for the resting place of the previous night, the party trudging along the narrow beach in Indian file. All at once Ben, who was in the lead, stopped short.

"Look!" he exclaimed, pointing overhead.

The boys followed his finger and gave a shout of astonishment.

"Smoke!" cried Frank.

"Hurrah," cheered Harry, "it's the Southern Cross."

He waved his hat at the dark wreaths of vapor that were blowing across the island overhead.

The smoke scudded across the sky like small fleecy clouds, but it momentarily grew thicker and blacker.

"She's smoking up all right," laughed Billy Barnes, all his fears gone now that rescue seemed at hand.

Ben alone of the party seemed troubled.

"I'm not so sure that that's steamer smoke," he said slowly.

"Why, what else can it be?" demanded Frank.

"I don't know,"—sniff,—"but it seems to me,"—sniff,—"that's a whole lot of smoke for a steamer to be making, and"—sniff—"I don't like the looks of it."

"What else could make such smoke?" demanded Harry.

For reply Ben asked what seemed a strange question.

"Did you put the fire out when we left the camp?"

In an instant they all perceived without his speaking a word, what the sailor feared.

The island was on fire!

A few minutes later the smell of the burning trees and the crash as they fell, while the flames leaped through the brushwood beneath them, was clearly borne to them.

They were marooned on a floating island, and the island was in flames.

The dense smoke of the fire had by this time blotted out the sky and all they could see above them was a thick canopy of smoke. It rose in a huge pillar blotting out the sky and poisoning the air.

"What are we to do?" gasped Billy.

"I don't see what we can do," was Frank's reply, "our escape is cut off. We shall burn to death."

Indeed it seemed as if the boys were doomed to death in the flames. With incredible rapidity the fire, undoubtedly started by their carelessness in not extinguishing their camp fire, came leaping and roaring through the forest.

Suddenly out of the woods directly in front of them leaped a lithe spotted form, and without glancing to right or left, the creature shot into the sea. It swam quite a distance and then sank.

"A jaguar," exclaimed Ben; "a good thing it was too scared to attack us."

"Yes, I haven't got a cartridge left," said Frank, gazing ruefully at his empty revolver.

"I don't think that would do us much good if you had; we might as well die by a jaguar's teeth and claws as by being burned to death," said Harry.

The boys were now witnesses of a strange scene. Driven by the heat of the fire scores of terrified animals passed them. There were small agoutis or wild pigs, monkeys, birds of various kinds,—including huge macaws and numerous snakes. The creatures paid not the least attention to the boys, but, crazed with fear, made for the sea. The birds alone soared off and doubtless the stronger winged of them reached land.

"If we only had the Golden Eagle here," sighed Frank.

"Hurrah," suddenly shouted Ben, capering about, "hurrah, I've got a plan."

For a minute or two the boys regarded him as one might an insane person, but as he went on to explain his plan they grasped at it as a last resort. Two large tree trunks lay near to where they stood. They had fallen apparently in some tropical storm, so that their bulk rested on some smaller trees. It was as if they were on rollers.

"We will lash those together with some withes and make a raft," exclaimed Ben.

"How are you going to get them into the water?" asked Billy.

"By the natural rollers that are underneath them," replied the sailor; "come, we have no time to lose if we are to escape."

Indeed they had not. The fire was now so close that they could feel its ardent breath. Sparks were falling about them in red-hot showers and already some of the brush in their vicinity was beginning to smoke. Soon it would burst into flame and then they were doomed.

Feverishly they worked and soon had the two trunks lashed together firmly with long "lianas" or creepers of tough fibre that grew in great profusion everywhere. The work of getting the trunks into the water was, thanks to the natural rollers, not so hard as might have been anticipated. Ben and Frank managed the placing of the rollers, which were carried in front of the logs as fast as its hinder end cleared some of them. In this manner their "raft," if such it could be called, was soon afloat.

It seemed a terribly insecure contrivance with which to risk a voyage, but they had no choice. The whole island, except the spot in which they had worked, was now one raging furnace, and had their situation not been so critical, the party would have been compelled to admire the wild magnificence of the spectacle. Great red tongues of flame shot up through the blanket of dark smoke, dying it crimson. Occasionally there would be a dull crash as some huge forest monarch fell prostrate, or the dying scream of some creature overtaken by the flames rang out.

"Quick, onto the raft," shouted Frank as the clumsy craft floated at last.

It did not take the adventurers long to follow his directions. The heat from the fire was now intense and they lost no time in putting the two branches they had cut to use as paddles into action. It was hard work but they found to their delight that their raft moved when they dug into the water with their clumsy means of propulsion.

"Hurrah!" shouted Billy as they began to glide slowly over the waves, "we are saved from the floating island."

"Yes, but for how long," exclaimed Frank; "we have no provisions and no water. How long can we live without them?"

"We must hope to be picked up," said Harry.

"That is our only hope," rejoined Frank, "if we are not—"

There was no need for him to finish the sentence, even had he been able to, for while he was still speaking a startling thing happened.

The raft was about twenty feet from the shore, but despite the distance a dusky form that had rushed out of the wood with a wild howl, shot through the air and landed fairly upon it.

[Illustration: "With a Wild Howl, Shot Through the Air."]

With its menacing eyes of green, like balls of angry flame, dull yellow hide, catlike form, and twitching tail, the boys had no difficulty in recognizing it for what it was.

A giant panther.

There was no possibility of escape. As the creature growled menacingly the boys realized that they were practically without means of protection against this new enemy.

As the panther, too, realized its position, it drew back on its haunches and, lashing its tail wickedly, prepared to spring.

CHAPTER IX.

A QUEER ACCIDENT.

It was no time for words. Almost before any of them realized just what had happened, the savage creature that had taken refuge from the flames on their frail craft, launched its yellow body at them in a great leap. But the brute miscalculated its spring this time.

With a howl of dismay it shot beyond its mark and fell into the sea.

"Quick, boys, get your knives ready," shouted Ben, "we've got a fighting chance now."

Hastily the boys, though they felt skeptical as to the effectiveness of these small weapons against such a formidable enemy, got out their hunting knives. But they were not destined to use them.

The howl of dismay which the panther had uttered as it found itself plunged into the water was quickly changed to a shrill scream of terror from its huge throat. At the same instant a number of triangular fins dashed through the water toward it.

"Sharks!" shouted Harry.

Attracted by the number of animals that had taken to the water to escape the fire the creatures had gathered in great numbers about the island and were devouring the fugitives right and left. Fully a dozen of the monsters rushed at the panther which, formidable as it was on land, was, like most of the cat tribe, at a great disadvantage in the water.

It could make no resistance but a few feeble snaps to the avalanche of sharks that rushed at it, and a few seconds after the onslaught the water was crimsoned with the blood of the panther and the boys were safe from that peril. But the sharks now offered almost as great a danger as had the land monster.

Made furious by the taste of so much food they cruised alongside the rickety raft gazing with their little eyes at its occupants till shudders ran through them. The boys tried to scare them away by flourishing the branches used as oars, but this, while it scared them at first, soon lost its effect on the sea-tigers, who seemed determined to keep alongside the raft, evidently hoping that sooner or later they would get a meal.

All the afternoon the boys took turns paddling with their branches and by this means, and impelled also by one of the ocean currents that abound in this latitude, the smoking island gradually drew further and further away. But the sharks still cruised alongside and now and again one bolder than the others would turn partly on his back and nose up against the raft, showing his cruel, saw-like teeth and monstrous mouth as he did so.

"I don't wonder they call them sea-tigers," said Frank, "more terrible looking monsters I never saw."

The tropic night soon closed and darkness shut down with great rapidity. Far off the boys could see the red glare cast by the flaming island.

"That's queer," exclaimed Frank suddenly. He had been regarding the island intensely for some time.

"What's queer?" demanded Billy.

"Why, do you see that long wavering ray of light shooting up near the island," he cried, pointing in that direction, "what can it be?"

The others looked and to their amazement, as soon as Ben's eyes fell on the strange ray of white light, the old sailor began dancing a sort of jig to the imminent danger of his tumbling in among the sharks.

"Hurray! hurray!" he shouted, "douse my topsails and keel-haul my main-jibboom, if that ain't the best sight I've seen for a long time."

"Have you gone crazy?" asked Harry.

"Not much, my boy," shouted the old tar, "that queer light—as you call it—yonder is a ship's searchlight. The Southern Cross like as not."

"She must have seen the smoke from the burning island and sailed in that direction," exclaimed Frank.

"How can we attract their attention?" cried Billy.

"Easy enough," said Ben, pulling off his shirt, "this is a good shirt, but I'd rather have my life than a whole trunk full of shirts. Now for some matches and we'll make a night signal."

The matches were soon produced and the old sailor set fire to the garment. It flared up brightly and made a fine illumination, but as the flare died out there was nothing about the movement of the searchlight to indicate that the signal had been seen.

"We must try again," said Ben.

It was Harry's turn to sacrifice a shirt this time, and he lost no time in ripping it off. As Frank prepared to light it, however, an unfortunate—or even disastrous—accident occurred.

The waterproof box of matches slipped from his fingers in his excitement, and before any of them could recover it, it was overboard. The rush of a great body through the water at the same instant told them that one of the watchful sharks had swallowed it.

"I wish they'd burn his insides out," cried Billy.

"Everybody search their pockets for a match," commanded Frank. A prolonged scrutiny resulted in yielding just one match. It came from Ben's pocket.

Frank lit it with great care. For one terrible moment, as they all hung breathless over it, it seemed as if it was going out. It finally caught, however, and flared up bravely.

"Now the shirt," cried Frank.

It was thrust into his hands and he waved the blazing garment above his head till the flames streaked out in the night.

This time a cheer went up from the castaways on the raft.

Their signal had been seen.

At least so it appeared, for the searchlight, which had been sweeping about near the island, suddenly shot its long finger of light in their direction. As the vessel bearing it neared them a bright glow enveloped the figures on the raft, who were alternately hugging each other and shaking hands over the prospect of their speedy deliverance.

A few minutes later all doubt was dissolved. The approaching vessel was the Southern Cross, and the adventurers were soon answering to excited hails from her bridge. To lower a boat and get them on board once more did not take long, and it was not till late that night that, the story of their perils having been told and retold at least twenty times, they managed to get to their old bunks.

Never had the mattresses seemed so soft or the sheets so comfortable as they did to the tired boys. Their heads had hardly touched the pillows before they were off in dreamland—a region in which, on that night at least, fires, panthers and sharks raged in inextricable confusion.

Before they retired they heard from the lips of Captain Hazzard the puzzle their disappearance from the ship had proved. The Southern Cross, it appeared, on the day following her collision with the floating island, had cruised in the vicinity in the hope of finding some trace of the castaways. Her search was kept up until hope had been about abandoned. The sight of the glare of the blazing island had, however, determined her commander to ascertain its cause, with the result that while her searchlight was centered on the strange phenomenon the boys' tiny fire signal had been seen by a lookout in the crow's nest and the ship at once headed for the little point of light.

For his part the commander was much interested in hearing of the floating island. It cleared up what had been a great mystery, namely, the nature of the obstruction they had struck, and proved interesting from a scientific point of view. Captain Hazzard told the boys that these great tracts of land were, as Ben had said, not uncommon off the mouth of the Amazon, but that it was rarely one ever got so far out to sea.

Two weeks later, after an uneventful voyage through tropic waters, during which the boys had had the interesting experience of crossing the equator, and had been initiated by being ducked in a huge canvas pool full of salt water placed on the fore deck, the Southern Cross steamed into the harbor of Monte Video, where she was to meet her consort, the Brutus, which vessel was to tow her down into the polar regions.

A few interesting days were spent in Monte Video and the boys sent many letters home and Captain Hazzard forwarded his log books and data as obtained up to date. Professor Sandburr spent his time among the natives collecting memoranda about their habits while the boys roamed at their leisure about the city. They saw a bull fight, a spectacle that speedily disgusted them, and witnessed the driving into the stock-yards of a huge herd of cattle rounded up by wild and savage-looking gauchos on wiry ponies.

One day, while they were walking through a back street leading to some handsome buildings, they heard terrible cries coming from a small hut in unmistakably American tones.

"Come on, let's see what is the matter?" shouted Frank.

Followed by Billy and Harry, the lad ran toward the mud hut from which the cries had issued. As they neared it a terrible-looking figure dashed out. Its white duck suit was streaming with red and the same

color was daubed all over its face and head.

"Oh, boys, save me!" it cried as it ran towards the three lads.

"Why, it's Professor Sandburr!" exclaimed Harry, gazing at the crimson-daubed figure; "whatever is the matter?"

"Oh-oh-oh-oh," howled the professor, dancing about, "it's a woman in that hut. She threw some stinging stuff all over me."

"Why, it's chile con-carne!" exclaimed Frank, examining the red stuff that daubed the unfortunate professor from head to foot; "good gracious, what a scare you gave us; we thought you had been attacked with knives and terribly cut."

There was a trough of water near by and to it the boys conducted the professor, who was half-blinded by the stinging Spanish dish, which is a sort of pepper stew. It took a long time to clean him, during which quite a crowd gathered and laughed and jeered, but at last they had the luckless scientist looking more presentable.

"Now tell us what happened?" asked Frank, as they started back toward the city in a hired "volante," or native carriage, that had been passing, by good luck, as they finished their cleaning process.

"Well, my dear boys, it's an outrage. I will see the mayor or the president about it, or whoever is in charge of those things in this land. I saw a fine looking specimen of a hopping sand-toad going into that house and I dashed in after it with my net extended. As soon as I rushed in I upset a sort of baby carriage that stood by the door. Two children, who were in it, started howling in a terrible manner. I know a little Spanish and I tried to explain, but before I could do so the mother threw a whole pot of that hot stuff over me and called me a kidnapper, a robber, a thief. Upon my word I think I may be considered lucky that she didn't shoot me."

"I think you may, indeed," agreed the boys, who could hardly keep from laughing at the comical sight the professor presented with his head cocked on one side and all daubed with the traces of his "hot bath."

Early the next day the Brutus passed a steel hawser to the Southern Cross and the two vessels proceeded out of the harbor of Monte Video.

"Well, we're really off for the pole at last," exclaimed Frank, as the shores grew dim behind them and the long ocean swell made itself felt.

"Yes," rejoined the professor, who was busy getting specimens of jelly-fish in a bucket he lowered overboard by a line. "I wonder what sort of creatures I can catch in the ice there. I don't care so much about the pole, but I do want to get a 'Pollywoginisius Polaris.'"

"Whatever is that?" asked Frank.

"It's a sort of large pollywog with fur on it like seal," replied the professor gravely.

"A sort of fur overcoat," suggested Billy, nudging Frank mischievously.

"Exactly," said the professor gravely; "if you see one will you catch it for me?"

"I certainly will," replied Billy gravely.

For several days the Brutus and the vessel she was towing kept on down the coast. At last one morning the captain announced that they were off the coast of Patagonia, where the famous giant tribes of aborigines and a kind of ostrich are to be found. The professor was greatly excited at this and begged to have the ships stopped and be allowed to go ashore.

"I am afraid that will be impossible," rejoined Captain Hazzard; "we must get into the Polar regions before the winter sets in, and if we delay we shall not be able to do so. No, we must keep on, I am afraid."

The Brutus was making good speed at the moment, and her tow was cutting obediently through the water after her. Sail had been set on all the masts, as there was a favoring breeze. Suddenly there came a jarring shock that threw everybody from their feet. The tow-line parted under the strain with a report like that of a gun.

"We have struck something," shouted the captain.

"A sunken wreck, probably," said the professor, who did not seem at all disturbed.

"Is there any danger?" asked Billy with rather a white face.

"We cannot tell yet till the ship has been examined," replied the captain. He gave orders to sound the well and sent some men forward to examine the vessel's bow.

Soon the ship's carpenter and Ben Stubbs came hurrying aft with scared faces.

"What is it?" demanded the captain, "are we seriously damaged?"

"We have sprung a leak forward and the water is pouring in," was the alarming reply.

CHAPTER X.

THE PROFESSOR IS KIDNAPPED.

The faces of all grew grave. A leak at sea is a serious menace. The point at which the water was entering the Southern Cross was soon found to be through a sprained plank a little below the water line. Captain Hazzard ordered canvas weighted and dropped overboard around the leak so that the pressure of water would hold it there. The carpenter's gang then set to work to calk the hole temporarily.

In the meantime the Brutus had put back, blowing her whistle inquiringly.

"Send them a wireless message telling them what has happened," the commander ordered Frank, who hastened to obey.

The captain of the Brutus ordered out his boat as soon as Frank's message had been conveyed to him and came aboard the Southern Cross. He agreed, after a consultation with Captain Hazzard, that it would be necessary to put in somewhere to refit.

"We are now off the mouth of the Santa Cruz river in Patagonia," said Captain Barrington, "it is a good place to lie to. I was there once on a passenger steamer that met with an accident. We can shift the cargo to the stern till we have raised the bow of the Southern Cross, and then we can patch up her prow easily," he said.

All agreed that this was a good plan. There was only one objection, and that was the so-called giants of Patagonia, who are hostile to all strangers. In view of the large force of men on board the two ships, however, and the numerous weapons carried, it was agreed that there was not much to be feared from the Patagonians.

The broken steel hawser was at once detached and a new one put in place and the two vessels headed for the shore, about one hundred and fifty miles distant. They arrived off the mouth of the Santa Cruz river the next day and the boys, who had been up before dawn in their anxiety to get their first glimpse of "The Land of the Giants," were rather disappointed to see stretched before them a dreary looking coast with a few bare hills rising a short distance inland. There were no trees or grass ashore, but a sort of dull-colored bush grew abundantly.

"I thought the giants lived in dense forests," said Billy, disgustedly; "this place is a desert."

"It was a fortunate accident though that brought us to this shore," said a voice behind them and Professor Sandburr's bony, spectacled face was thrust forward. "I would not have missed it for a great deal. I would like to capture a specimen of a Patagonian alive and take him home in a cage. The Patagonian dog-flea, too, I understand, is very curious."

The boys all laughed at this, but the professor was perfectly serious. There is no doubt that he would have liked to have done so and caged up a Patagonian where he could have studied him at his leisure.

The Brutus, with leadsmen stationed in her bows to test the depth of the water, proceeded cautiously up the river and finally came to anchor with her tow behind her about two miles from its mouth. The work of shifting some of the cargo of the Southern Cross to the stern so as to elevate her bow, was begun at once; as time was an important consideration. Soon all was declared ready for the carpenters

to start work and they were lowered on stages over the side and at once began to rectify the trouble. Some of them worked from a boat secured to the bow.

"Do you think you can persuade the captain to let us go ashore with you?" asked Frank of the professor, who was busy at once getting out all his paraphernalia in anticipation of going on what Billy called "a bug hunt."

"Certainly," declared the scientist confidently, "come along. I should like above all things to have you boys go ashore with me. Besides, I may teach you all to become faunal naturalists."

The delighted boys followed the old man to Captain Hazzard's cabin, but, to their disappointment, he forbade the expedition peremptorily.

"The Patagonians are dangerous savages," he said, "and I will not assume the responsibility of allowing you to risk your lives."

Nor did any persuasion of which the boys or the professor could make have any effect in causing the commander to change his mind. He was firm as adamant and reluctantly the boys made their way forward and watched the carpenters fix the leak, and when that palled they were compelled to fall back on fishing for an amusement.

The professor joined ardently in this sport despite his disappointment at not being allowed to go ashore. He managed to fix up a net attached to an iron ring with which he scooped up all kinds of queer fish out of the river, many of which were so ugly as to be repulsive to the boys. But the professor seemed to be delighted with them all.

"Ah, there, my beautiful 'Piscatorius Animata Catfisio,'" he would say, as he seized a struggling sea monster with a firm grip and plunged it into one of his tin tanks. "I'll dissect you to-night. You are the finest specimen of your kind I have ever seen."

The boys were suddenly interrupted in their fishing by blood-curdling yells from the old scientist. Looking up in alarm they saw him dancing about on the deck holding his arm as if in great pain, while in front of him on the deck a queer-looking, flat fish with a long barbed tail flopped about, its great goggle eyes projecting hideously.

Frank ran forward to pick up the creature and throw it overboard, but as he grasped it he experienced a shock that knocked him head over heels. As he fell backward he collided with the professor and the two sprawled on the deck with the professor howling louder than ever.

"No wonder they're hurt," shouted Ben Stubbs, coming up with a long boat-hook, "that's an electric ray."

"An electric what?" asked Billy.

"An electric ray. They carry enough electricity in them to run a small lamp, and when they wish they can give you a powerful shock. They kill their prey that way."

"Ouch—," exclaimed the professor, who had by this time got up, "the ray nearly killed me. Let me look at the brute so that I'll know one of them again."

"Why don't you put him in your collection?" asked Frank with a smile, although his arm still hurt him where the electric ray had shocked it.

"I want no such fish as that round me, sir," said the professor indignantly, and ordered Ben to throw the creature overboard with his boat-hook.

After supper that night the boys hung about the decks till bedtime. The hours passed slowly and they amused themselves by watching the moonlit shores and speculating on the whereabouts of the Patagonians.

Suddenly Billy seized Frank's arm.

"Look," he exclaimed, pointing to a low ridge that stood out blackly in the moonlight.

Behind the low eminence Frank could distinctly see a head cautiously moving about, seemingly reconnoitering the two ships. In a few seconds it vanished as the apparent spy retreated behind the ridge.

"That must have been a Patagonian," said Frank.

"Just think, they are so near to us and we cannot go ashore," sighed the professor, who was one of the group. "I wonder if they have any dogs with them?"

"I have a good mind to go, anyway," said the old man, suddenly, "I would like to write a paper on the habits of the Patagonians and how can I if I don't study them at first hand?"

"What if they chopped your head off?" asked Billy.

"They would not do that," rejoined the scientist, with a superior smile. "I have a friend who lived with them for a time and then wrote a book about them. According to him Captain Hazzard is wrong; they are not hostile, but, on the contrary, are friendly to white men."

"Then you think that Captain Hazzard doesn't know much about them?" asked Billy.

"I did not say that," replied the professor; "but he may be mistaken just like I was about the electric ray, which I thought was a South Atlantic skate. Just the same, I mean to find out for myself," he went on. "To-night when everyone is asleep but the man on duty, I am going to watch my opportunity and go ashore in the boat the carpenters left at the bow this afternoon. There are ropes hanging from the prow down which I can climb."

Soon after this the boys determined to turn in and, naturally, the professor's decision occupied a great deal of their conversation.

"Do you think we ought to tell the captain about what Professor Sandburr means to do?" asked Frank of the others.

"I don't think so," said Billy. "He is much older than we are and doubtless he knows what he is about. At the same time, though, I think we should watch and if he gets into trouble should try and help him out of it."

"Very well, then we will all be out on deck at midnight," said Frank, "and if we find that the professor is really serious in his intention to go ashore in the boat we will try and stop him. If he still persists we shall have to tell the captain."

The others agreed that the course that Frank recommended was the best one, and they all decided to adopt his plan.

But the boys were heavy sleepers and besides were tired out when they sought their bunks, so that when Frank, who was the first to wake, opened his eyes it was past one in the morning. With a start the boy jumped out of bed and hastily called the others.

"We may not be too late yet," he said, as he hastily slipped into trousers, shirt and slippers.

But the boys WERE too late. When they reached the bow they could see by peering over that the boat had gone and that the professor had penetrated alone into the country of the Patagonians.

Suddenly there came a shot from the shore and a loud cry of:

"Help!"

"It's the professor!" exclaimed Frank; "he's in serious trouble this time."

CHAPTER XI.

A BATTLE IN THE AIR.

To raise an alarm throughout the ship was the work of a few minutes and the watchman, whose carelessness had allowed the professor to slip away unnoticed, aroused the indignation of Captain Hazzard, who blamed him bitterly for his oversight. Several shots followed the one the boys had heard and more cries, but they grew rapidly fainter and at the same time the sound of horses galloping away in the distance was heard.

"They have carried him off," cried Captain Hazzard.

"Can we not chase them and rescue him?" asked Billy, "we've got plenty of men and arms."

"That would be of little use to us," was the reply, "the Patagonians are mounted and by this time they have got such a start on us that we could never hope to catch up to them on foot."

"Not on foot," put in Frank quietly, "but there is another way."

"What do you mean, boy?"

"That we can assemble the Golden Eagle in a couple of hours if you will give us the men to help."

Captain Hazzard thought a minute.

"It seems to be the only chance," he said at last, "but I don't know that I ought to let you assume such responsibility."

"We will be in no greater danger than the professor is; much less, in fact," urged Frank. "Please let us go. If we can save his life it is worth running the risk."

"Perhaps you are right, my boy," said Captain Hazzard at length, "at any rate, promise me to run no unnecessary danger."

The promise was readily given and with a cheer the men set to work to hoist the cases containing the sections of the aeroplane over the side and row them ashore. The work was carried on under the glare of the searchlights of the two ships. In two hours' time the Golden Eagle was ready for an engine test which showed her machinery to be in perfectly good trim.

"She is fit for the flight of her life," declared Frank, as he stopped the engine.

"Is everything ready?" asked Captain Hazzard.

"Yes," was the reply, "except for two canteens of water, some condensed soup tablets and two tins of biscuit."

"You have your weapons?"

"I have sent to the ship for two 'Express' rifles, each carrying a heavy charge and explosive bullets. In addition we have our revolvers and some dynamite bombs—the ones that were designed to be used in blasting polar ice," said Frank.

"One moment," said Captain Hazzard. He turned and hailed the ship: "Bring over six of the naval rockets from the armory!" he ordered.

"If you should need help," he said, in explanation of his order, "send up a rocket. They are made so that they are visible by day as well as night. In the daylight their explosion produces a dense cloud of black smoke visible at several miles. They also make a terrific report that is audible for a long distance."

The same boat that brought the boys' weapons carried the rockets and their provisions and at about four a. m. they were ready for their dash through the air. At the last minute it was decided to take Billy Barnes along as he knew something about handling an aeroplane and in a pinch could make himself useful.

"Good-bye and good luck," said Captain Hazzard fervently as the engine was once more started, with a roar like the discharge of a battery of gatling guns. From the exhausts blue flames shot out and the air was filled with the pungent odor of exploding gasoline.

With a wave of the hand and amid a cheer that seemed to rend the sky the Golden Eagle shot forward as Frank set the starting lever and rushed along over the level plane like a thing of life. After a short run she rose skyward in a long level sweep, just as the daylight began to show in a faint glow in the east.

It rapidly grew lighter as the boys rose and as they attained a height of 1,500 feet and flew forward at sixty miles an hour above the vast level tract of gravelly desert, by looking backward they could see the forms of the two ships, like tiny toys, far behind and below them. On and on they flew, without seeing a trace of the professor or the band that had undoubtedly made him prisoner.

"We must have overshot the mark," said Frank, as he set a lever so as to swing the aeroplane round. "We shall have to fly in circles till we can locate the spot where the Patagonians have taken him."

They flew in this manner for some time, sometimes above rugged broken land with great sun-baked clefts in it, and sometimes above level plains overgrown with the same dull colored brush they had noticed fringing the coast.

Suddenly Billy called attention to a strange thing. All about them were circling the forms of huge birds. Some of them measured fully ten feet from wing tip to wing tip. They had bald, evil-looking heads and huge, hooked beaks.

"They are South American condors, the largest birds in existence," cried Harry, as the monstrous fowls, of which fully a hundred were now circling about the invaders of their realm, seemed to grow bolder and closed in about the aeroplane.

"They mean to attack us," cried Frank, suddenly.

[Illustration: "They Mean to Attack Us."]

As he spoke one immense condor drove full at him, its evil head outstretched as if it meant to tear him with its hooked beak. The boy struck at it with one arm while he controlled the aeroplane with the other and the monstrous bird seemed nonplussed for a moment. With a scream of rage it rejoined its mates and they continued to circle about the aeroplane, every minute growing, it seemed, more numerous and bold.

"We shall have to fire at them," cried Frank at last. "If they keep on increasing in numbers they may attack us all at once and wreck our airship."

Hastily Harry and Billy unslung their heavy "Express" rifles and began firing. Ordinarily it is no easy task to hit a bird on the wing with a rifle, but so large a target did the huge bodies present that four fell at the first volley. As they dropped some of their cannibal companions fell on them and tore them to ribbons in midair. It was a horrible sight, but the boys had little time to observe it. Their attention was now fully occupied with beating off the infuriated mates of the dead birds, who beat the air about the aeroplane with their huge wings until the air-storm created threatened to overbalance it.

Again and again the boys fired, but failed to hit any more of the birds, although feathers flew from some of the great bodies as the bullets whizzed past them.

All at once the condors seemed to come to a decision unanimously. Uttering their harsh, screaming cries they rushed at the aeroplane, tearing and snapping with beak and claws. The machine yawed under their attack till it seemed it must turn over. Still, so far, Frank managed to keep it on an even keel.

"Bang! bang!" cracked the rifles again and again, but the loud angry cries of the birds almost drowned the sharp sound of the artillery.

It was a battle in the clouds between a man-made bird and nature's fliers.

Suddenly Frank gave a shout.

"The dynamite bombs!"

Swiftly and cautiously Harry got one of the deadly explosives ready. They were provided with a cap that set them off when they encountered any solid substance, as, for instance, when they struck the earth, but a small, mechanical contrivance enabled them to be adjusted also so that they could be exploded in midair.

"Isn't there danger of upsetting the aeroplane?" gasped Billy, as he saw the preparations.

"We'll have to chance that," was Harry's brisk response, "the birds are too much for us."

As he spoke he leaned out from the chassis and hurled the bomb high in the air. As he cast it out there was a slight click as the automatic exploder set itself.

"Hold tight," shouted Frank, setting the sinking planes.

The aeroplane rushed downward like a stone. Suddenly a terrific roar filled the air and the boys felt as if their ear drums would be fractured. The aeroplane swayed dizzily and Frank worked desperately at his levers and adjusters.

For one terrible moment it seemed that the Golden Eagle was doomed to destruction, but the brave craft righted herself and soared on.

The bomb had done its work.

Of the huge flock of condors that had attacked the Golden Eagle only a bare dozen or so remained. The rest had been killed or wounded by the bomb. The survivors were far too terrified to think of pursuing the boys and their craft further.

"Thank goodness we have escaped that peril," exclaimed Harry, as they sailed onward through the air; "who would ever have thought that such birds would have attacked an aeroplane."

"They frequently, so naturalists say, carry off babies and small animals to their rocky nests," was Frank's response, "and birds as bold as that I suppose resented the appearance of what seemed another and larger bird in their realm."

For an hour more the aeroplane soared and wheeled above the baking hot plains intersected by their deep gullies, but without result. The boys with sinking hearts were beginning to conclude that the professor had been carried off and hidden beyond hope of recovery, when Harry, who had been peering ahead through the glasses, indicated a distant spot behind a ridge with much excitement.

"I can see a horse tethered there," he cried.

The aeroplane was at once shot off in that direction and soon all doubt that they were in the vicinity of a band of Patagonians vanished. As the air craft rushed forward several tethered horses became visible and a column of smoke was seen rising from a deep gully behind the ridge. No doubt the Patagonians thought themselves well hid.

So secure did they feel, seemingly, that not even a sentry was visible.

"Do you think they are the same band that kidnapped the professor?" asked Billy.

"There's not much doubt of it," said Frank.

"At any rate we shall soon see," concluded Harry, as the aeroplane shot directly above the encampment of the giant Patagonians. Gazing downward the boys could see one of the savages, a huge figure more than six feet tall, in a feather mantle and armed with a formidable looking spear, pacing up and down, as if he were a chief of some kind. This belief was confirmed when one of the other tribesmen approached the man in the long cloak and addressed something to him with a low obeisance. Frank had by this time put the muffler in operation and throttled down the engine so that the aeroplane swung in lazy circles above the Patagonians, entirely unnoticed by them.

While they gazed the boys saw a figure led from a rude tent by several of the Patagonians, of whom there seemed to be two or three hundred in the camp. Instantly a loud yelling went up and several of the natives began a sort of dance, shaking their spears menacingly and wrapping their feather cloaks tightly about their tall figures.

"It's the professor!" shouted Frank, indicating the captive who had been taken from the tent.

"They are going to burn him alive!" shouted Harry in a voice of horror the next moment, pointing to the fire.

Indeed, it seemed so. The Patagonians began piling fresh bundles of wood on their fire, the smoke of which the boys had seen from far off. Their savage yells and cries filled the air.

CHAPTER XII.

ADRIFT!

Six of the huge warriors picked up the unfortunate professor, who was bound hand and foot, and were preparing to carry him toward the fire when there came a startling interruption to their plans.

With a roar as if the desolate mountains about them were toppling about their ears one of the dynamite bombs carried by the boys was dropped and exploded a short distance from the camp. A huge hole was torn in the earth and a great cloud of dust arose.

Shrieks and cries filled the air and, although none of them was hurt, the Patagonians rushed about

like ants when some one has stirred up their nests. Suddenly one of them happened to look upwards and gave a wild yell.

Instantly the tribesmen, without waiting to pick up any of their possessions, fled for their horses and mounting them rode out of sight without daring to look round. To accelerate their progress the boys sent another dynamite bomb and two rockets after them, and then descended to pick up the professor who, bound as he was, had been left on the ground and was quite as much in the dark as to what he owed his escape to as the Indians were.

"Oh, boys!" he exclaimed, as the machine glided to earth and the boys stepped out, "you were just in time. I really believe they meant to make soup out of me. They were worse than the electric ray, a great deal. Oh, dear, I wish I had obeyed Captain Hazzard, but I wanted to get a specimen of a Patagonian dog-flea. They are very rare."

"Did you get one?" asked Frank, laughing in spite of himself at the woe-begone figure of the professor, who, his bonds having been cut, now stood upright with his spectacles perched crookedly on his nose.

"I did not," moaned the man of science, who seemed more grieved over his failure to collect the rare specimen than he did over his own narrow escape, "there is every other kind of flea around here, though, I found that out while I was in the tent."

"Come, we had better be going," said Frank at length, after they had explored the camp and picked up some fine feather robes and curious weapons which the Patagonians had left behind them in their hurry to escape.

"The Patagonians might take it into their heads to come back and attack us and then we should be in a serious fix."

All agreed that it was wise not to linger too long in the camp and so a few minutes later the Golden Eagle was sent into the air again, this time with an added passenger.

"Dear me, this is very remarkable," said the professor, "quite like flying. I feel like a bird," and he flapped his long arms till the boys had to laugh once more at the comical man of learning.

As they flew along the professor explained to them that after he had taken the boat he had heard a dog barking ashore, and being confident that the Patagonians were friendly people and that it was a Patagonian dog he heard, he determined to do some exploring in search of the Patagonian dog-flea. He had only crawled a few steps from the river bank, however, when he felt himself seized and carried swiftly away. It was then that he had fired the shot the boys heard. Later he had managed to break loose and then had discharged his revolver some more, without hitting anybody, however.

The Patagonians had then bound him and tied him to the back of a horse and rapidly borne him into the interior. They might not have meant any harm to him at first, he thought, but when they found him examining a dog with great care they were convinced the simple-minded old man was a witch doctor and at once sentenced him to be burned to death.

"How about your friend that said that the Patagonians were a friendly race?" asked Billy, as the professor concluded his narrative.

"I shall write a book exposing his book," said the professor, with great dignity.

Nothing more occurred till, as they drew near the ships, Frank waved his handkerchief and the others fired their revolvers in token of the fact that they had been successful in their quest. In reply to these joyous signals the rapid-fire gun of the Southern Cross was fired and the air was so full of noise that any Patagonians within twenty miles must have fled in terror.

The professor, looking very shamefaced, was summoned to Captain Hazzard's cabin soon after he had arrived on board and put on clean garments. What was said to him nobody ever knew, but he looked downcast as one of his own bottled specimens when he left the cabin. By sundown, however, he had quite recovered his spirits and had to be rescued from the claws of a big lobster he had caught and which grabbed him by the toe as soon as he landed it on deck.

In the meantime the aeroplane was "taken down" and packed up once more while the boys came in for warm congratulations on the successful outcome of their aerial dash to the rescue. Captain Hazzard himself sent for them and complimented them highly on their skill and courage.

"I shall mention your achievement in the despatches I shall send north by the Brutus," he said in conclusion to the happy boys.

The damage to her bow being repaired, there was nothing more to keep the Southern Cross and her escort in the dreary river, and with no regrets at leaving such a barren, inhospitable country behind them, the pole-seekers weighed anchor early the next day.

Ever southward they forged till the weather began to grow chilly and warm garments were served out to the men from the storerooms of the Southern Cross. To the boys the cold was welcome, as it meant that they were approaching the goal of their journey.

Captain Barrington doubled watches day and night now, for at any moment they might expect an encounter with a huge iceberg. In the antarctic these great ice mountains attain such bulk that they could crush the most powerful ship like an eggshell. It behooves all mariners venturing into those regions, therefore, to keep a most careful lookout for them.

One day soon after dinner, while the boys were on the fore peak chatting with Ben Stubbs, the old bos'n suddenly elevated his nose, drew in a long breath and announced:

"I smell ice."

Recollecting that Ben had said that he "smelled land" on another memorable occasion, the boys checked their disposition to laugh, although the professor, who was trying to dissect a strange little fish he had caught the day before, ridiculed the idea.

"Ice being a substance consisting of frozen water and without odor, what you say is a contradiction in terms," he pronounced with much solemnity.

"All right, professor," said Ben, with a wink at the boys, "maybe ice ain't as easy to tell as an electric ray, but just the same I'm an old whaling man and I can smell ice as far as you can smell beefsteak frying."

This was touching on the scientist's weak spot, for like many men of eminence, he was nevertheless fond of a good dinner and his alacrity in answering meal calls had become a joke on board.

"You are arguing 'ad hominum,' my dear sir," spoke the professor with dignity. "Ice and beefsteak have no affinity for one another, nor do they partake of the same qualities or analyses."

Whatever Ben might have said to this crushing rejoinder was lost forever, for at this moment there was a great disturbance in the water a short distance from the ship. The boys saw a whale's huge dark form leap from the waves not forty feet from the bow and settle back with a crash that sent the water flying up in the air like a fountain.

"Whale ho!" shouted Ben, greatly excited. "Hullo," he exclaimed the next instant, "now you'll see some fighting worth seeing."

As he spoke, a form dimly seen, so near to the surface was it, rushed through the water and crashed headlong into the whale.

"What is it, another whale?" asked Billy.

"No, it's a monster sword-fish," cried Ben, "and they are going to fight."

The water grew crimson as the sword-fish plunged his cruel weapon into the great whale's side, but the monster itself, maddened by its wound, the next instant charged the sword-fish. Its great jaws opened wide as it rushed at its smaller enemy, for which however, it was no match,—for the sword-fish doubled and swam rapidly away. The next instant it dived, and coming up rammed the whale with its sword once more. With a mighty leap the sea monster mounted clear of the water once more, the blood spouting from its wounds.

But its strength was gone and it crashed heavily downward while it was in mid-spring. A warning shout from Ben called the attention of everybody who had been watching the fight to a more imminent danger to the ship. The giant cetacean in falling to its death had struck the towing cable and snapped it under its huge bulk as if the stout hawser had been a pack thread.

"We are adrift," shouted Captain Barrington, rushing forward with Captain Hazzard by his side.

Another cry of alarm mingled with his as he uttered it.

"The iceberg!" cried Ben.

The old sailor pointed ahead and there, like a huge ghost drifting toward them, was a mighty

structure of ice—the first berg the boys had ever seen. With its slow advance came another peril. The air grew deathly cold and a mist began to rise from the chilled sea.

"Signal the Brutus!" shouted Captain Barrington, but the fires had been extinguished on the Southern Cross when she was taken in tow, and she had nothing to signal with but her rapid firing gun. This was fired again and again and soon through the mist there came back the low moan of the siren of the Brutus.

"They won't dare to put back after us in this," exclaimed Captain Barrington, as he stood on the bridge with the boys beside him, "we shall have to drift helplessly here till the iceberg passes or—"

"Until we are crushed," put in Captain Hazzard quietly, "wouldn't it be as well to have the boats made ready for lowering," he went on.

"A good idea," agreed Captain Barrington. Ben Stubbs was summoned aft and told to give the necessary orders, and soon the men were at work clearing the life-boats in case things should come to the worst.

The mist grew momentarily denser and the cold more intense, yet so critical was the situation that nobody thought of leaving the decks to don warmer clothing. The fog, caused by the immense berg chilling the warmer ocean currents, was now so thick that of the mighty berg itself they could perceive nothing. The knowledge that the peril was invisible did not make the minds of those on board the drifting vessel any the easier.

"If only we had steam we could get out of the berg's path," said Captain Barrington, stamping his foot.

"Couldn't we hoist sail," suggested Frank.

"There is no wind. I wish there were," replied the captain, "then it would blow this mist away and we could at least see where we are driving to."

In breathless silence and surrounded by the dense curtain of freezing mist the polar ship drifted helplessly on, those on board realizing that at any moment there might come the crash and disaster that would follow a collision with the monster berg.

Suddenly there came a shock that almost threw those on the bridge off their feet.

Hoarse cries and shouts sounded through the mist from the bow of the ship, which was no longer visible in the dense smother.

Above all the confused noises one rang out clear and terrible.

"The berg has struck us. We are sinking!" was the terrible cry.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SHIP OF OLAF THE VIKING.

"Stop all that confusion," roared Captain Barrington through his megaphone, which he had snatched from its place on the bridge.

Silence instantly followed, only to be succeeded by a tearing and rending sound.

The rigging of the foremast had caught in a projecting ridge of the berg and was being torn out. The ship trembled and shook as if a giant hand was crushing her, but so far her heavy timbers seemed to have stood the shock. Presently the noises ceased and the air began to grow less chilly.

"I believe we are free of the berg!" shouted Captain Hazzard.

The rapid clearing away of the dense fog that had hung like a pall about the seemingly doomed ship confirmed this belief. By great good fortune the Southern Cross had been spared the fate of many ships that venture into the polar seas, and the boys gazing backward from the bridge could see the mighty berg, looking as huge as a cathedral, slowly increasing its distance from them, as it was borne along on

the current.

"Hurrah, we are safe!" cried Harry.

"Don't be too sure," warned Captain Barrington. "I hope we are, but the vessel will have to be examined before we can be certain. In any event our foremast and bowsprit are sad wrecks."

The portions of the ship he referred to were, indeed, badly damaged. The shrouds supporting the foremast had been ripped out by the berg on the port or left hand side of the vessel, and her jibboom had been snapped off short where the berg struck her. Two boats had, besides, been broken and the paint scraped off the polar ship's sides.

"We look like a wreck," exclaimed Billy.

"We may think ourselves lucky we got off so easily," said Captain Barrington, "we have just gone through the deadliest peril an antarctic ship can undergo."

The Brutus now came gliding up, and after congratulations had been exchanged between the two ships, a new hawser was rigged and the Southern Cross was once more taken in tow.

"I don't want any more encounters with icebergs," said Billy, as the ship proceeded toward her goal once more.

"Nor I," spoke the others.

"It's a pity this isn't at the north pole," said the professor, who was varnishing dried fish in the cabin, where this conversation took place.

"Why?" asked Frank.

"Because, if it had been, there might have been a polar bear on that iceberg. I have read that sometimes they drift away on bergs that become detached and are sighted by steamers quite far south."

"Why,—do you want a polar bear skin," asked Billy, "you can buy lots of them in New York."

"Oh, I don't care about the polar bear," said the professor quickly, "but the creatures have a kind of flea on them that is very rare."

At the idea of hunting such great animals as polar bears for such insignificant things as fleas, the boys all had to laugh. The professor, who was very good-natured, was not at all offended.

"Small animals are sometimes quite as interesting as large ones," was all he said.

The next day the rigging and bowsprit were refitted and further and further south steamed the Brutus with the polar ship in tow. The fires of the Southern Cross had now been started and her acetylene gas plant started going as the heat and light were needed. Icebergs were now frequently met with and the boys often remained on deck at night, snugly wrapped in furs, to watch the great masses of ice drift by.

Although they were as dangerous as ever, now that the ships were in cooler water the bergs did not create a fog as they did in the warmer region further north. By keeping a sharp lookout during the day and using the searchlights at night, Captain Barrington felt fairly confident of avoiding another encounter with an ice mountain. The damage the ship had sustained in her narrow escape from annihilation had proved quite difficult to repair, though before the vessel reached the sixtieth parallel it had been adjusted.

"Well, boys," announced Captain Hazzard one day at noon, "we are now not more than three hundred miles from the Great Barrier."

"Beyond which lies the polar mystery," exclaimed Frank.

Captain Hazzard glanced at him quickly.

"Yes, the polar mystery," he repeated, "perhaps now is as good a time as any for telling you boys the secret of this voyage. Come to my cabin and I will tell you one of the objects of our expedition, which hitherto has been kept a secret from all but the officers."

The excitement of the boys may be imagined as they followed the captain to his cabin and seated themselves on a seat arranged above the radiator.

"It's the ship of Olaf," whispered Billy to Harry.

"Of course," began Captain Hazzard, "the main object of this expedition is to plant the flag of the United States at 'furthest south,' even if not at the pole itself."

"And to capture a South Polar flea and a fur-bearing pollywog," put in the professor, who had included himself in the invitation to the boys.

"Exactly," smiled the captain, "but there is still another object scarcely of less importance than the ones that I and the professor," he added with a smile, "have enumerated."

"You boys have all heard of the daring rovers who set out centuries ago in their ships to explore unknown oceans?"

The boys nodded.

"You mean the Vikings?" asked Frank.

"Yes," replied the captain. "Well, some time ago a member of one of our great scientific bodies, while traveling in Sweden, discovered in a remote village an odd legend concerning some sailors who claimed to have seen an old Viking ship frozen in the ice near the Great Barrier. They were poor and superstitious whalemens and did not dare to disturb it, but they brought home the story."

"And you think the ship is still there," broke in Harry.

"If they really saw such a thing there is every reason to suppose that it is," rejoined the lieutenant. "In the ice anything might be preserved almost indefinitely. Providing the yarn of the whalemens is true, we now come to the most interesting part of the story. The scientist, who has a large acquaintance among librarians and custodians of old manuscripts in European libraries, happened to mention one night to a friend what he had heard in the little Norwegian fishing village. His friend instantly surprised him by declaring that he had an idea what the ship was."

"To make a long story short, he told him that years before, while examining some manuscripts in Stockholm, he had read an account of a Viking ship that in company with another had sailed for what must have been the extreme South Pacific. One of the ships returned laden with ivory and gold, which latter may have been obtained from some mine whose location has long since been lost, but the other never came back. That missing ship was the ship of Olaf the Rover, and as her consort said, she had last been seen in the South Pacific. The manuscript said that the returned rovers stated that they had become parted from the ship of Olaf in a terrific gale amid much ice and great ice mountains. That must have meant the antarctic regions. This much they do know, that Olaf's ship was stripped of her sails and helpless when they were compelled by stress of weather to abandon her. It is my theory and the theory of a man high in the government, who has authorized me to make this search, that the ship of Olaf was caught in a polar current and that the story heard so many years after about the frozen ship in the ice is true."

"Then somewhere down there along the Great Barrier there is a Viking ship full of ivory and gold, you believe?" asked Frank.

"I do," said the captain.

"And the ice has preserved it all intact?" shouted Billy.

"If the ship is there at all she is undoubtedly preserved exactly as she entered the great ice," was the calm reply.

"Gosh!" was the only thing Billy could think of to say.

"Sounds like a fairy tale, doesn't it?" gasped Harry.

"Maybe some Viking fleas got frozen up, too," chirped the professor, hopefully. "What a fine chance for me if we find the ship."

"Have you the latitude and longitude in which the whalers saw the frozen vessel?" asked Frank.

"I have them, yes," replied the captain, "and when the winter is over we will set out on a search for it. On our march toward the pole that will make only a slight detour."

"Was it for this that you wanted to have our aeroplane along?" asked Frank, his eyes sparkling.

"Yes," was the reply, "in an airship you can skim high above the ice-fields and at a pace that would make an attempt to cover unknown tracts on foot ridiculous. If the Viking ship is to be found it will have to be your achievement."

Captain Hazzard was called out on deck at this juncture and the boys, once he was out of the room, joined in a war dance round the swinging cabin table.

"Boys, will you take me along when you go?" asked the professor anxiously. "If there is any chance of getting a Viking flea I would like to. It would make my name famous. I could write a book about it, too."

"But you've got a book to write already about the Patagonians," objected Frank.

"Bless me, so I have," exclaimed the absent-minded old man. "However that can wait. A Viking flea would be a novelty indeed."

At this moment loud tramlings on the deck overhead and shouts apprised them that something out of the ordinary must be occurring. Just as they were about to emerge from the cabin the captain rushed in. He seemed much excited.

"My fur coat, quick," he cried, seizing the garment from Frank, who had snatched it from its peg and handed it to him.

"What has happened?" asked Frank.

The words had hardly left his lips before there came a terrible grinding and jarring and the Southern Cross came to a standstill. Her bow seemed to tilt up, while her stern sank, till the cabin floor attained quite a steep slope.

"What can be the matter?" cried the professor, as he dashed out after the boys and the captain, the latter of whom had been much too excited to answer Frank's question.

CHAPTER XIV.

MAROONED ON AN ICE FLOE.

"We have struck a polar reef!"

It was Captain Barrington who uttered these words after a brief examination.

"Do you think we will be able to get off?" Frank asked Ben Stubbs, who with the boys and the rest of the crew was in the bow peering down at what appeared to be rocks beneath the vessel's bow, except that their glitter in the lanterns that were hung over the side showed that the ship was aground on solid ice.

"Hard to say," pronounced Ben. "These polar reefs are bad things. They float along a little below the surface and many a ship that has struck them has had her bottom ripped off before you could say 'knife.'"

"Are we seriously damaged?" asked Billy, anxiously gazing at the scared faces around him.

"I hope not," said the old salt; "there is one thing in our favor and that is that we were being towed so that our bow was raised quite a bit, and instead of hitting the ice fair and square we glided up on top of it."

Another point in favor of the ship's getting off was that there had been no time to reshift the cargo, which, it will be recalled, had been stowed astern when her bow was sprung off Patagonia, so that she rode "high by the head," as sailors say. So far as they could see in the darkness about twenty feet of her bow had driven up onto the polar reef. The Brutus had stopped towing in response to the signal gun of the Southern Cross in time to prevent the towing-bitts being rooted out bodily or the cable parting.

"There is nothing to be done till daylight," pronounced Captain Barrington, after an examination of the hold had shown that the vessel was perfectly dry. "The glass indicates fair weather and we'll have to stay where we are till we get daylight."

Little sleep was had by any aboard that night, and bright and early in the morning the boys, together with most of the crew, were on deck and peering over the bow. The day was a glorious one with the temperature at two below zero. The sun sparkled and flashed on the great ice-reef on which they had grounded, and which in places raised crested heads above the greenish surface of the sea.

No water had been taken on in the night, to the great relief of the captain, and soon a string of gaudy signal flags were set which notified the Brutus, lying at anchor about a mile away, to stand by. The hawser had been cast off over night and so the Brutus was free to steam to any position her captain thought advisable. As soon as the signalling was completed he heaved anchor and stood for a point about half-a-mile to the leeward of the Southern Cross, where he came to anchor once more.

Breakfast, a solid meal as befitted the latitude in which they were, was hastily despatched and the boys bundled themselves up in polar clothes and hurried out on deck to see what was going forward. Captain Barrington, after a short consultation with Captain Hazzard, decided to order out boat parties to explore the length and depth of the ice-reef so that he could make plans to free his ship off her prison.

The boys begged to be allowed to accompany one of the boat parties and so did the professor. Their requests were finally acceded to by the two captains and they formed part of the crew of Boat No. 3, in charge of Ben Stubbs.

"Wait a minute," shouted the professor, as, after the boat to which they were assigned lay ready for lowering, the boys clambered into her.

"What's the matter?" demanded the boys.

"I want to get my dredging bucket," exclaimed the man of science, "this is a fine opportunity for me to acquire some rare specimens."

He dived into his cabin, the two ends of his woolen scarf flying out behind him like the tail of some queer bird. He reappeared in a second with the bucket, an ordinary galvanized affair, but with a wire-net bottom and a long rope attached, to allow of it being dragged along the depths of the sea.

"All ready!" shouted Frank, as the professor clambered into the boat.

The "falls" rattled through the blocks and the boat struck the water with a splash, almost upsetting the professor, who was peering over the side through his thick spectacles as if he expected to see some queer polar fish at once. The crew swarmed down the "falls," and as Ben gave the order, pulled away for the outer end of the reef, the station assigned to them.

In accordance with their instructions when they arrived at the end of the reef, the crew, headed by Ben Stubbs, left the boat and tramping about on the slippery ice tried to ascertain its thickness and how far under water it extended. The boys soon tired of sitting idle in the boat and, as they had been forbidden to land on the treacherous ice of the reef, cast about for something to do. The professor soon provided a digression.

"Look there," he suddenly shouted, pointing at a black triangular shaped object that was moving about on the green water a short distance from the boat.

"What can it be?" wondered Billy.

"Some sort of rare fish, I don't doubt," rejoined the professor.
"Let's row out and see."

The boys, nothing loath, shoved off, and as Ben and the crew of the boat were far too busy sounding and poking about on the reef to notice them, they rowed off unobserved.

The triangular object proved elusive, and after rowing some time, the boys found they had come quite a distance from the ship without getting much nearer to it. Suddenly a great, shining black back curved itself out of the water and the boys saw that the sharp triangular thing was an immense dorsal fin attached to the back of a species of whale they had not so far seen, although they had sighted many varieties since entering the Antarctic regions.

"Let's give it a shot," cried Billy, and before any one could stop him, the young reporter fired at the creature.

To their amazement, instead of diving, as do most whales when injured by a bullet or otherwise, the creature raised its blunt head and gazed at them out of a wicked little red eye.

"What—what—what's the matter with him do you suppose?" gasped Billy.

As he spoke the whale began lashing the water with its tail till the white foam spread all about it, slightly flecked with red here and there, in token that Billy's shot had struck it.

"I'm afraid that we are in for serious trouble," suddenly said the professor.

"Why, you don't mean that the creature is bold enough to attack us?" gasped Billy.

"That's just what I do," exclaimed the professor, apprehensively.

"The creature is a killer whale—an animal as ferocious as a shark and far more bold. I should have recognized what it was when I saw that sharp fin cruising about."

"We must row back," shouted Frank, and he and Harry sprang to the oars.

But they were too late. With a flashing whisk of its tail the ferocious killer whale dived, and when it came up its head was within twenty feet of the boat.

"Pull for that floe!" shouted the professor, pointing to a small island of ice floating about not far from them. It was their only chance of escape, and the boys gave way with a will. But pull as they would their enemy was faster than they. Just as the nose of their boat scraped the floe the great "killer" charged.

Frank had just time to spring onto the floe and drag Harry after him when the monster's head rammed the boat, splitting it to kindling wood with a terrible crackling sound. The stout timbers might as well have been a matchbox, so far as resistance to the terrific onslaught was concerned.

Billy jumped just as the boat collapsed under him, and gained the floe. But where was the professor?

For an instant the terrible thought that he had perished flashed across the boys' minds, but just then a cry made them look round, and they saw the unfortunate scientist, blue with cold and dripping with icy water, come clambering over the other side of the little floe on which they stood. He had been hurled out of the boat when the whale charged and cast into the water. His teeth were chattering so that he could hardly speak, but he still had his bucket, and insisted on examining it to see if any creatures had been caught in it when he took his involuntary plunge.

The whale, after its charge and the terrific bump with which it struck the boat, seemed to be stunned and lay quietly on the water a few feet from the floe, from which it had rebounded.

"I'll bet he's got a headache," exclaimed Billy.

"Headache or no headache, I don't see how we are going to get off this floe unless we can attract the attention of the ship, and we are drifting further away from it every minute," said Frank, gravely.

"Let's fire our pistols," suggested Billy.

"I didn't bring mine," said Frank.

"Nor I," said Harry.

"N-n-n-n-or I," chattered the shivering professor.

"Gee whitakers," shouted Billy, "and to top the bad luck, I left mine in the boat. I laid it on a seat after I had fired at the whale."

"B-b-b-b-boys, w-w-w-w-w-hat are we g-g-g-oing to d-d-d-do?" shivered the scientist.

"Shout," said Frank; "come on, all together."

They shouted at the tops of their voices, but in the clear polar air, rarified as it is, sound does not carry as well as in northern latitudes, and there was no response.

All the time the floe, slowly revolving in the current like a floating bottle, was drifting further and further from the ships. The situation was serious, and, moreover, the scientist was evidently suffering acutely, although he made no complaint, not wishing to add to their anxieties. Frank, however, insisted on their each shedding a garment for the professor's benefit, and although the scientist at first refused them, he finally consented to don the articles of dry apparel and seemed to be much comforted by their warmth.

Faster and faster the floe drifted, and they were now almost out of sight of the ships. The boys' faces, although they tried not to show their fear, grew very pale. There seemed to be no prospect of their

being saved, and in the rigorous cold of that climate they knew they could not survive many hours without food or drink.

Suddenly Frank, who had been gloomily watching the progress of the floe, gave a shout of surprise.

"What's the matter?" said Harry.

"Are we g-g-g-g-going d-d-d-d-down?" gasped the professor.

CHAPTER XV.

DYNAMITING THE REEF.

"No," shouted the boy, "not that, but I think I see a chance of our being saved!"

"Have they seen us from the ships?" asked Billy.

"No, but the floe has struck a different current and we are drifting back."

"Are you s-s-s-sure of t-t-t-this?" asked the professor.

"Certain," replied Frank; "I have been watching the progress of other pieces of drifting ice and the current seems to take a distinct curve here and radiate backward toward the pole."

"Then we are saved—hurray!" shouted Billy, dancing about on the slippery ice, and falling headlong, in his excitement, on the treacherous footing it afforded.

"No use hollering till we are out of the woods," said Frank; "the current may make another turn before we land near the ships."

This checked the enthusiasm and the boys all fell to anxiously watching the course their floe was likely to pursue.

"There's our whale," shouted Billy, suddenly. "Look what a smash on the nose he got."

The great monster seemed to have recovered from its swoon and was now swimming in slow circles round the floe, eyeing the boys malevolently, but not offering to attack them. Evidently it was wondering, in its own mind, what it had struck when it collided with the boat and the floe.

The floe drifted onward, with the vessels' forms every moment growing larger to the boys' view. All at once a welcome sound rang out on the nipping polar air.

"Boom!"

"They have missed us and are firing the gun," cried Frank.

"That's what," rejoined Billy; "and we are going to get a terrible lecture when we get back on board, too."

Soon the floe, drifting steadily southward, by the strange freak of the antarctic current, came in view of the lookouts on the ships, who had been posted as soon as the boys were missed. The boats were at once despatched, and headed for the little ice island.

The killer whale suddenly took it into his head, as the boats drew near, to try one more attack, but Dr. Watson Gregg, the ship's surgeon, who stood in the bow of the first boat, saw the ferocious monster coming and, with three quick bullets from a magazine rifle, ended the great brute's career forever. His huge, black bulk, with its whitish belly and great jaws, floated on the surface for a few minutes, and the boys estimated his length at about thirty feet.

"Room enough there to have swallowed us all up," commented Billy, as they gazed at the monster.

"Well, young men, what have you got to say for yourselves?" asked Dr. Gregg, as the boats drew alongside.

The boys all looked shamefaced as they got into the boat, and two sailors assisted the half-frozen

professor into it. They realized that they had been guilty of a breach of discipline in taking off the boat, and that, moreover, their disobedience had cost the expedition one of its valuable assets, for there was no hope of ever putting the smashed craft together again.

On their return to the ship Captain Hazzard did not say much to them, but what he did say, as Billy remarked afterward, "burned a hole in you."

However, after a hearty dinner and a change of clothing, they all, even the professor—who seemed none the worse for the effects of his cold bath—cheered up a bit, more especially as Captain Barrington had announced that he had a plan for getting the ship off the reef. Ben Stubbs, who had, with his crew, been taken off the end of the obstruction by another boat, had announced that the depth of the obstruction did not seem to exceed twenty feet and its greatest width forty. Where the ship's bow rested the breadth was about thirty feet and the depth not more than twenty.

"My gracious," suddenly cried the professor as the boys came out from dinner; "I have suffered a terrible loss!"

His face was so grave, and he seemed so worried, that the boys inquired sympathetically what it was that he had lost.

"My bucket, my dredging bucket," wailed the scientist. "I was too cold to examine it thoroughly and I recollect now that I am sure it had some sort of sea-creatures in the bottom of it."

"What has become of it?" asked Frank, hardly able to keep from laughing.

"I left it on the ice floe," wailed the professor. "I must have it."

"Well, if it's on the floe it will have to stay there," remarked Frank. "There seems to be no way of getting it off."

"I wonder if the captain wouldn't send out some men in a boat to look for it," hopefully exclaimed the collector, suddenly.

"I shouldn't advise you to ask him," remarked Ben Stubbs, who just then came up, his arms laden with packages. "We've lost one boat through going after peppermints or specimints, or whatever you call 'em."

"Possibly, as you say, it would not be wise," agreed the professor; "never mind, perhaps I can catch a fur-bearing pollywog at the South Pole."

He seemed quite cheered up at this reflection and smiled happily at the thought of achieving his dream.

"What have you got there, Ben?" asked Billy, pointing to the queer-looking boxes and packages the boatswain was carrying.

"Dynamite, battery boxes, and fuses," replied the old sailor.

"Whatever for?" asked the young reporter. "Are you going to blow up the ship?"

"Not exactly, but we are going to blow her OUT."

"Dynamite the ice, you mean?"

"That's it."

"Hurray, we'll soon be free of the ice-drift," cried Harry, as they followed the boatswain forward and watched while he and several of the crew drilled holes in the ice and adjusted the dynamite on either side of the bow, at a distance of about two hundred feet from the ship in either direction.

Caps of fulminate of mercury were then affixed to the explosive and wires led from it to the battery boxes.

"How will that free us?" asked the professor, who, like most men who devote all their time to one subject, was profoundly ignorant of anything but deep sea life and natural history.

"It is the nature of dynamite to explode downwards," said Frank. "When that charge is set off it will blow the ice away on either side and we shall float freely once more."

"Wonderful," exclaimed the professor. "I had better get my deep sea net. The explosion may kill some curious fish when it goes off."

He hurried away to get the article in question, while the boys stood beside Captain Hazzard, who was about to explode the heavy charges. Everybody was ordered to hold tight to something, and then the commander pushed the switch.

"Click!"

A mighty roar followed and the ship seemed to rise in the air. But only for an instant. The next minute she settled back and those on board her broke out in a cheer as they realized that they once more floated free of the great ice-reef.

The two ends of the obstruction having been blown off by the dynamite, the center portion was not buoyant enough to support the weight of the Southern Cross, and went scraping and bumping beneath her to bob up harmlessly to the surface at her stern.

There was only one dissenting voice in the general enthusiasm that reigned on board at the thought that they were now able to proceed, and that was the professor's. He had been untangling a forgotten rare specimen of deep-sea lobster from his net, when the explosion came.

In his agitation at the vessel's sudden heave and the unexpected noise, he had let his hand slip and the creature had seized him by the thumb. With a roar of pain the professor flung it from him and it flopped overboard.

"Hurray! we are off the reef, professor," shouted Frank, running aft to help adjust a stern cable that had been thrown out when the Southern Cross grounded.

"So I see, but I have lost a rare specimen of deep-sea lobster," groaned the professor, peering over the side of the ship to see if there were any hope of recapturing his prize.

The anchor of the Southern Cross was dropped to hold her firmly while the steel hawser was reconnected with the Brutus, and soon the coal ship and her consort were steaming steadily onward toward the Barrier and the polar night.

It grew steadily colder, but the boys did not mind the exhilarating atmosphere. They had games of ball and clambered about in the rigging, and kept in a fine glow in this way. The professor tried to join them at these games, but a tumble from halfway up the slippery main shrouds into a pile of snow, in which he was half smothered, soon checked his enthusiasm, and he thereafter devoted himself to classifying his specimens.

Great albatross now began to wheel round the vessel and the sailors caught some of the monster white and gray birds with long strings to which they had attached bits of bread and other bait. These were flung out into the air and the greedy creatures, making a dive for them, soon found themselves choking. They were then easily hauled to deck. Captain Hazzard, who disliked unnecessary cruelty, had given strict orders that the birds were to be released after their capture, and this was always done. The birds, however, seemed in no wise to profit by their lessons, for one bird, on the leg of which a copper ring had been placed to identify him, was captured again and again.

The professor, particularly, was interested in this sport, and devised a sort of lasso with a wire ring in it, with which he designed to capture the largest of the great birds, a monster with a wing spread of fully ten feet. Day after day he patiently coaxed the creature near with bits of bread, but the bird, with great cunning, came quite close to get the bread, but as soon as it saw the professor getting ready to swing his "lariat" it vanished.

"Ah-ha, my beauty, I'll get you yet," was all the professor said on these occasions. His patience was marvelous.

One day, as the ships were plunging along through ice-strewn seas, not far to the eastward of the inhospitable and bleak Shetland Islands, the professor accomplished his wish, and nearly ended his own career simultaneously.

The boys, who were amidships talking to Ben Stubbs, were apprised by a loud yell that something unusual was occurring aft, and ran quickly in that direction. There they saw a strange sight. The professor, with his feet hooked into a deck ring, was holding with both hands to the end of his lasso, while the albatross, which he had at last succeeded in looping, was flapping with all its might to escape.

"Help, help, he'll pull me overboard," screamed the professor.

"Let go the halliards!" roared Ben, who saw that there was, indeed, danger of what the professor feared happening.

"I can't let him escape. Help me!" yelled the professor.

"My feet are slipping!" he went on.

"Let go of the albatross," shouted the boys, who with Ben were hastening up the ladder leading to the raised stern. It did not look, however, as if they could reach there before the professor was carried overboard like the tail of a kite, by the huge bird he had lassoed.

Suddenly, with a howl of terror, the professor, who never seemed to entertain the thought of letting go of the bird, was jerked from his foothold by a sudden lurch of the ship.

Ben Stubbs was just in time. He sprang forward with wonderful agility and seized the professor's long legs just as the man of science was being pulled over the rail into space by the great albatross.

"Let go, dod gast you!" he bellowed, jerking the lasso out of the professor's hands, while the albatross went flapping off, a long streamer of rope hanging from its neck.

"I've lost my albatross," wailed the scientist.

"And blamed near lost yer own life," angrily exclaimed Ben. "Why didn't you let go?"

"Why, then I'd have lost the bird," said the professor, simply. "But I thank you for saving my life."

"Well, don't go doin' such fool things again," said Ben, angrily, for he had feared that he would not be in time to save the bigoted scientist's life.

The professor, however, was quite unruffled, and went about for some hours lamenting the loss of the huge antarctic bird. He consoled himself later, however, by shooting a beautiful little snow petrel, which he stuffed and mounted and presented to Ben Stubbs, who was quite mollified by the kind-hearted, if erratic, professor's gift.

CHAPTER XVI.

A POLAR STORM.

Early in February the voyagers, whose progress had been slow, found themselves in a veritable sea of "Pancake ice." Everywhere in a monotonous waste the vast white field seemed to stretch, with only a few albatrosses and petrels dotting its lonely surface. The thermometer dropped to ten below zero, and the boys found the snug warmth of the steam-heated cabins very desirable. There was a fair wind, and sail had been set on the Southern Cross to aid the work of towing her, and she was driving through the ice with a continuous rushing and crashing sound that at first was alarming, but to which her company soon grew accustomed.

Captain Barrington announced at noon that day that they were then in lat. 60 degrees 28 minutes, and longitude 59 degrees 20 minutes West—bearings which showed that they would be, before many days had past, at the Great Barrier itself. Excitement ran high among the boys at the receipt of this news, and Frank and Harry, who had fitted up a kind of work-room in the warmed hold, worked eagerly at their auto-sledge, which was expected to be of much use in transporting heavy loads to and from the ship to the winter quarters.

Before the two vessels reached the Barrier, however, they were destined to encounter a spell of bad weather.

One evening Ben Stubbs announced to the boys, who had been admiring a sunset of a beauty seldom seen in northern climes, that they were in for a hard blow, and before midnight his prediction was realized. Frank awoke in his bunk, to find himself alternately standing, as it seemed, on his head and his feet. The Southern Cross was evidently laboring heavily and every plank and bolt in her was complaining. Now and again a heavy sea would hit the rudder with a force that threatened to tear it from its pintles, solidly though it was contrived.

Somewhat alarmed, the boy aroused the others, and they hastened out on deck. As they emerged from the cabin the wind seemed to blow their breath back into their bodies and an icy hand seemed to grip them. It was a polar-storm that was raging in all its fury.

As she rose on a wave, far ahead the boys could see the lights of the Brutus. Only for a second, however, for the next minute she would vanish in the trough of a huge comber, and then they could hear the strained towing cable "twang" like an overstretched piano wire.

"Will it hold?" That was the thought in the minds of all.

In order to ease the hawser as much as possible, Captain Barrington, when he had noted the drop of the barometer, had ordered a "bridle," or rope attachment, placed on the end of the cable, so as to give it elasticity and lessen the effect of sudden strains, but the mountainous seas that pounded against the blunt bows of the Southern Cross were proving the stout steel strand to the uttermost.

The boys tried to speak, but their words were torn from their lips by the wind and sent scattering. In the dim light they could see the forms of the sailors hurrying about the decks fastening additional lashings to the deck cargo and making things as snug as possible.

Suddenly there came a shout forward, followed by a loud "bang!" that made itself audible even above the roar of the hurricane.

The cable had parted!

Considering the mountainous seas in which they were laboring and the violence of the storm, this was a terrifying piece of intelligence.

It meant that at any moment they might drift helplessly into some mighty berg and be crushed like an egg-shell on its icy sides. Captain Barrington muffled up in polar clothes and oilskins, rushed past the boys like a ghost and ran forward shouting some order. The first and second officers followed him.

Presently the voice of the rapid-fire gun was heard, and the boys could see its sharp needles of white fire splitting the black night.

A blue glare far away answered the explosions. It was the Brutus signaling her consort. But that was all she could do. In the terrific sea that was running it would have been impossible to rig a fresh cable. The only thing for the two ships to do was to keep burning flare lights, in order that they might keep apart and not crash together in the tempest.

"Shall we go down, do you think?" asked Billy, shivering in spite of himself, as a huge wave towered above them as if it would engulf the polar ship, and then as she rose gallantly to its threatening bulk, went careening away to leeward as if angry at being cheated of its prey.

"We can only hope for the best," said a voice at his elbow. It was Captain Hazzard. "I have implicit confidence in Captain Barrington. He is a sailor of rare mettle."

These remarks were shouted at the top of the two speakers' voices, but they sounded, in the midst of the turbulent uproar that raged about them, like the merest whispers.

Time and again it seemed that one of the great waves that came sweeping out of the darkness must engulf them, but so far the Southern Cross rode them like a race-horse, rising pluckily to them as they rushed at her. Captain Barrington and his officers were trying to get some headsail put on the vessel to keep her head up to the huge waves, but they were unwilling to imperil any one's life by ordering him out on the plunging bowsprit, that was now reared heavenward and again plunged downward as if pointing to the bottom of the sea.

Ben Stubbs it was who finally volunteered to crawl out, and two other American seamen followed him. They succeeded, although in deadly peril half a dozen times, in getting the jib gaskets cast loose, and then crawled back half frozen to receive the warm plaudits of the officers and more substantial rewards later on. With her jib hoisted, the Southern Cross made better weather of it, but the seas were fast becoming more mountainous and threatening. The wind screeched through the rigging like a legion of demons. To add to the turmoil some casks got loose and went rolling and crashing about till they finally went overboard as a great wave toppled aboard.

"We must see how the professor is getting on," said, or rather yelled, Frank suddenly.

He and the boys entered the cabin structure aft, which seemed warm and cosy with its light and warmth after the turmoil of the terrific battle of the elements outside.

But a prolonged search failed to reveal any trace of the man of science.

Where could he be?

A scrutiny of his cabin, even looking under the bunk, failed to reveal him. The boys began to fear he might have been swept overboard, when suddenly Frank exclaimed:

"Perhaps he is in his laboratory."

"Hiding there?" asked Billy.

"No, I don't think so. The professor, whatever his oddities may be, is no coward," rejoined Frank.

"No, his search for the Patagonian dog-flea proved that," agreed Harry.

Frank lost no time in opening the trap-door in the floor of the main cabin, which led into what had formerly been the "valuables room" of the Southern Cross, but which had been fitted up now as a laboratory for the professor.

"There's a light burning in it," announced Frank, as he peered down.

"Oh, professor—Professor Sandburr, are you there?" he shouted the next moment.

"What is it? Is the ship going down?" came back from the depths in the voice of the professor. He seemed as calm as if it was a summer's day.

"No, but she is having a terrible fight with the waves," replied the boy.

"She has broken loose from the towing ship. The cable has snapped!" added Harry.

"Is that so?" asked the professor calmly. "Will you boys come down here for a minute? I want to see you."

Wondering what their eccentric friend could possibly wish in the way of conversation at such a time, the boys, not without some difficulty, clambered down the narrow ladder leading into the professor's den. They found him balancing himself on his long legs and trying to secure his bottles and jars, every one of which held some queer creature preserved in alcohol. The boys aided him in adjusting emergency racks arranged for such a purpose, but not before several bottles had broken and several strange-looking snakes and water animals, emitting a most evil smell, had fallen on the floor. These the professor carefully gathered up, though it was hard work to stand on the plunging floor, and placed in new receptacles. He seemed to place great value on them.

"So," he said finally, "you think the ship may go down?"

"We hope for the best, but anything may happen," rejoined Frank; "we are in a serious position. Practically helpless, we may drift into a berg at any moment."

"In that case we would sink?"

"Almost to a certainty."

"Then I want you to do something for me. Will you?"

The boys, wondering greatly what could be coming next, agreed readily to the old scientist's wish. Thereupon he drew out three slips of paper. He handed one to each of the boys.

"I wrote these out when I first thought there was danger of our sinking," he said.

The boys looked at the writing on their slips. They were all the same, and on each was inscribed:

"The man who told me that the Patagonians were a friendly race is a traitor to science. I, Professor Simeon Sandburr, brand him a teller of untruths. For Professor Thomas Tapper, who told me about the fur-bearing pollywog of the South Polar seas, I have the warmest respect. I leave all my books, bottled fishes and reptiles to the Smithsonian Institute. My servant, James, may have my stuffed Wogoliensuarious. My sister is to have my entire personal and real estate. This is my last will and testament.

"Simeon Sandburr.

"M.A.-F.R.G.S.-M.R.H.S.-Etc., etc."

"What are we to do with these papers?" asked Frank, hardly able, even in the serious situation in which they then were, to keep from laughing.

"One of you boys may escape, even if the ship does go down," said the professor, gravely: "If any of us should get back to civilization I want the world to know that the Patagonians are not a friendly race, and that I died hoping to capture the fur-bearing pollywog of the South Polar seas."

At this moment a sudden shock hurled them headlong against the glass-filled shelves, smashing several bottles and releasing the slimy, finny contents, and sending them all in a heap on the floor.

"We have struck something!" cried Frank.

"Something terrible has happened!" shouted Harry and Billy.

"We are sinking, boys," yelled the professor; "don't forget my last will and testament."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE GREAT BARRIER.

To rush on deck was the work of a few moments. If it was a scene of confusion the boys had left, the sight that now met their eyes was far more turbulent.

"The boats! the boats! We are sinking!"

"We are going down!"

"The iceberg has sunk us!"

These and a hundred other cries of terror filled the air, for the wind seemed to have died down, though the sea still ran high, and sounds were now more audible. Off to the starboard side of the ship the boys perceived a mighty towering form, which they knew must be the iceberg they had encountered. The crew fought madly for the boats.

Suddenly a sharp voice rang out:

"I'll shoot the first man that lays a hand on the boats!"

It was Captain Barrington. He stood on the stern deck steadying himself against the rail. In his hands gleamed two revolvers. Beside him stood Captain Hazzard, a look of stern determination on his face. Ben Stubbs and several other seamen, who had not lost their heads, were grouped behind them prepared to quell any onslaught on the boats.

The members of the crew, who had become panic-stricken when the helpless ship encountered the iceberg, paused and looked shamefaced.

"We've a right to save our lives," they muttered angrily.

"And prove yourselves cowards," exclaimed Captain Barrington. "You ought to be ashamed to bear the names of American seamen! Get forward, all of you, and let me see no more of this."

The stern voice of their commander and his evident command of himself reassured the panic-stricken crew and they withdrew to the fore-castle. Their shame was the more keen when it was found that, while the Southern Cross had been severely bumped by the iceberg, her stout timbers had sustained no damage.

By daybreak the sea had calmed down somewhat, and the wind had still further moderated. But the danger was by no means over till they could get in communication with the Brutus. Frank was set to work on the wireless and soon "raised" the towing ship, the captain of which was delighted to hear of his consort's safety. The position of the Southern Cross being ascertained, her bearings were wirelessed to the Brutus, and she then cast anchor to await the arrival of the towing ship.

As the line was once more made fast, having been spliced till it was as strong as new, the professor came up to the boys. He looked rather sheepish.

"Would you mind giving me back those papers I gave you last night," he said.

"You mean the last will and testament?" Frank could not help saying.

"That's it. I have changed my mind. I will show up that Patagonian fellow in a book."

The professor, as he received the little slips of paper, scattered them into tiny bits and threw them overboard.

"You are quite sure you have not been fooled also on the fur-bearing pollywog?" asked Frank.

"Quite," replied the professor, solemnly. "Professor Tapper is one of our greatest savants."

"But so was your friend who told you the Patagonians were a friendly tribe," argued Frank.

"I am quite sure that Professor Tapper could not have been mistaken, however."

"Has Professor Tapper ever been in the South Polar regions?" asked Billy, seriously.

"Why, no," admitted the professor; "but he has proved that there must be a fur-bearing pollywog down here."

"In what manner has he been able to prove it?" asked Harry.

"He has written three volumes about it. They are in the Congressional library. Then he contributed a prize-essay on it to the Smithsonian Institute, which has bound it up with my report on the Canadian Bull Frog. He is a very learned man."

"But the South Polar pollywog is then only a theory?"

"Well, yes—so far," admitted the professor; "but it is reserved for me to gain the honor of positively proving the strange creature's existence."

"And if there should be no such thing in existence?" asked Frank.

"Then I shall write a book denouncing Professor Tapper," said the professor, with an air of finality, and turning away to examine the water through a pair of binoculars.

On moved the ships and at last, early one day, Captain Barrington called the boys on deck and, with a wave of the hand, indicated a huge white cliff, or palisade, which rose abruptly from the green water and seemed to stretch to infinity in either direction.

"The Great Barrier," he said, simply.

"Which will be our home for almost a year," added Captain Hazzard.

The boys gazed in wonder at the mighty wall of snow and ice as it glittered in the sunlight. It was, indeed, a Great Barrier. At the point where they lay it rose to a height of 130 feet or more from the water, which was filled with great detached masses of ice. Further on it seemed to sweep to even greater heights.

This was the barrier at which Lieutenant Wilkes, on his unlucky expedition, had gazed. The mighty wall that Shackleton and Scott, the Englishmen, had scaled and then fought their way to "furthest South" beyond. The names of many other explorers, French, English, Danish, and German, rushed into the boys' minds as they gazed.

Were they destined to penetrate the great mysteries that lay beyond it? Would their airship be successful in wresting forth the secret of the great white silence?

"Well?" said Captain Barrington, breaking the silence at length, with a smile; "pretty big proposition, eh?"

The boys gazed up at him awe-struck.

"We never dreamed it was anything like this," said Frank. "I always pictured the Great Barrier as something more or less imaginary."

"Pretty solid bit of imagination, that ice-wall yonder," laughed Captain Hazzard.

"How are we ever going to get on the top of it?" asked Billy.

"We must steam along to the westward till we find a spot where it shelves," was the reply.

"Then it is not as high as this all the way round the polar regions?"

"No, in places it shelves down till to make a landing in boats is simple. We must look for one of those spots."

"What is the nature of the country beyond?" asked Frank, deeply interested.

"Ice and snow in great plateaus, with here and there monster glaciers," was the reply of Captain Hazzard. "In places, too, immense rocky cliffs tower up, seeming to bar all further progress into the mystery of the South Pole."

"Mountains?" gasped Billy.

"Yes, and even volcanoes. This has given rise to a supposition that at the pole itself there may be flaming mountains, the warmth of which would have caused an open polar sea to form."

"Nobody knows for certain, then?" asked Frank.

"No, nobody knows for certain," repeated Captain Hazzard, his eyes fixed on the great white wall. "Perhaps we shall find out."

"Perhaps," echoed Frank, quite carried away by the idea.

"What is known about the location of the pole?" asked Billy.

"It is supposed to lie on an immensely high plateau, possibly 20,000 feet above sea level. Shackleton got within a hundred miles of it he believes."

"And then he had to turn back," added Captain Barrington.

"Yes; lack of provisions and the impossibility of traveling quickly after his Manchurian ponies had died compelled him to leave the mystery unsolved. Let us hope it remains for the American flag to be planted at the pole."

"Are there any animals or sea-creatures there, do you know?" inquired the professor, who had been an interested listener.

"If there is an open polar sea there is no doubt that there is life in it," was the answer, with a smile; "but what form such creatures would assume we cannot tell."

"Perhaps hideous monsters?" suggested the imaginative Billy.

"More likely creatures like whales or seals," returned Captain Hazzard.

"If there is such a thing as a creature with a South Polar flea in its fur I would like to catch it," hopefully announced the scientist.

"Seals are covered with them," rejoined the officer.

"Pooh, those are just common seal-fleas," returned the professor. "I would like to find an insect that makes its home at the pole itself."

"Well, perhaps you will," was the rejoinder.

"I hope so," said the professor. "It would be very interesting."

All this time the two vessels were steaming slowly westward along the inhospitable barrier that seemed, as Frank said, to have been erected by nature to keep intruders away from the South Polar regions. As the professor concluded his last remark the lookout gave a sudden hail.

"Shipwrecked sailors!"

"Where away?" shouted Captain Barrington.

"Off to the starboard bow, sir," came back the hail.

Captain Barrington raised his glasses and looked in the direction indicated. The boys, too, brought binoculars to bear. They were greatly excited to see what seemed to be four men standing up and waving their arms on a raft drifting at some distance away.

"Lower a boat," commanded Captain Barrington.

The command was speedily complied with—in a few seconds one of the stanch lifeboats lay alongside.

"Do you boys want to go?" asked Captain Hazzard.

"Do we?" asked Billy. "I should say."

"All right, away with you."

"Can I go, too? I might get some specimens," asked the professor, eagerly.

"Yes, but don't try to catch any more killer whales," was the answer, which brought a general laugh.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE PROFESSOR TAKES A COLD BATH.

"Give way, men!" shouted Ben Stubbs, who was in command of the boat; "them poor fellers must be perishin' of cold and hunger."

The boat fairly flew through the water, skillfully avoiding, under Ben's careful steering, the great floes of ice which were drifting about.

The boys and the professor were in the bow, eagerly scanning the raft with the four black figures upon it. The castaways kept waving their arms in the most pitiable fashion.

Suddenly the professor exclaimed:

"There's something queer about those men!"

"You'd be queer, too, if you was drifting about the polar seas on an old raft," returned Ben Stubbs.

All the men laughed at this and the professor said no more. But he scanned the "castaways" carefully, and so did the boys. As they drew nearer, the latter also began to observe that they were the funniest looking men they had ever seen.

"They've got on long black coats with white waistcoats to their knees," cried Billy.

"So they have," exclaimed Harry. "If it wasn't too ridiculous, you'd say they had on evening clothes."

"They're not men at all," suddenly shouted the professor, with an air of triumph. "I thought I was not mistaken."

"Not men!" roared Ben. "What are the poor critters, then—females?"

"Neither men nor women," was the astonishing reply. "They are penguins."

All the men turned at this, and one of them, who had sailed in the polar regions before, announced, with a shout of laughter:

"The doc is right. Them's Emperor penguins, sure enough—taking a joy-ride through the ice."

The queer birds betrayed not the slightest excitement at the approach of the boat, but stood gazing solemnly at it, waving their little flippers,—somewhat like those of a seal, only feathered,—up and down in a rhythmic way.

"They act like band leaders," was Frank's remark.

"Better go back to the ship," said Ben, much disgusted at the upshoot of the expedition, and somewhat chagrined, too, if the truth must be told, at the professor's triumph over him.

"No, let us catch one," urged the professor. "I would like to see if it is possible to tame one."

"Yes, let's go up to them and see what they look like at close range," cried Frank.

"All right, if we don't waste too much time," agreed Ben. "Give way, men."

They soon drew near the strange South Polar birds who blinked solemnly at them as if to say:

"And who may you be?"

As they bobbed up and down on the piece of drift wood the boys had mistaken for a raft, the sight was so ludicrous that the boys burst into a hearty laugh.

"Hush," warned the professor, holding up his hand; "you may scare them."

They were big birds of their kind, standing fully four feet, and it was not strange that from the ship they had been mistaken for shipwrecked men; indeed, it is not the first time such an incident has occurred in the South Polar climes.

"Steady now, men," said the professor, bowing his lean form over the bow of the boat as they drew near to the penguins.

"Ah! my feathered beauties, if you will only stay there and not move, I will soon have one of you," he whispered to himself, as the boat,—the men rowing as silently as possible,—glided alongside.

The birds made no sign of moving, and evidently had not the slightest fear of the strange beings, such as the newcomers must have seemed to them. Instead, they seemed mildly curious and stretched their necks out inquiringly.

"Here, chick-chick-chicky," called the professor, by an odd inspiration, as if he were calling to the chickens in the barnyard at home.

"Here, chick-chick-chicky. Pretty chick-chick-chicky."

Suddenly he made a grab for the nearest penguin, and at the same instant the boys gave a shout of dismay. As he seized it, the creature—affrighted when it felt the professor's bony arms about it,—had dived and the scientist, losing his balance, had followed it into the water.

This might not have been so serious, but the other penguins, seeing the professor's plight, started to attack him, beating him back into the icy water every time he came to the surface.

"Ouch, you brute—oh, boys, help—o-o-o-h, this water is cold. Get me out, somebody. Scat, get away, you penguins."

These were some of the cries uttered by the luckless professor, as he struggled to get to the inside of the boat.

When they could, for laughing at the ludicrous plight, the men and the boys beat off the big penguins with the oars and hauled the professor into the boat. His nose was pecked badly and was of a ruddy hue from his misadventure. Fortunately, one of the men had some stimulant with him and this was given to the professor to drink and the strong stuff quickly revived him. He sat up in the boat and talked with animation while the boat was being rowed back to the ship.

"Bless my soul, what an adventure," he puffed. "Ouch, my poor nose. I thought the penguins would peck it off. Boys, that penguin was as slippery as a greased pig and as fat as butter. Oh, dear, what a misadventure, and I've ruined a good suit of clothes and broken a bottle of specimens I had in the pockets. Never mind, I can catch some more."

Thus the professor rattled on, from time to time feeling his very prominent nose, apparently in some doubt as to whether he still retained the feature.

"I guess you are cured of penguin hunting?" remarked Frank.

"Who, I?" asked the professor, in mild surprise. "Oh, no, my dear boy. I will get a penguin yet, even if I have to fight a regiment of them. I'll get one, never fear, and tame him to eat out of my hand."

"I hope so, I'm sure," said Frank, with a smile at the odd old man's enthusiasm.

"Hullo, what's that?" cried Billy, suddenly pointing.

"What?" chorused the boys.

"Why that creature off there on the ice flapping about,—it seems to be in distress."

"There is certainly something the matter with it," agreed Frank.

What seemed to be a huge bird was struggling and flapping about on the floes at no great distance from them.

"Other birds are attacking it!" cried Billy.

It was so, indeed. Numerous albatrosses and other large sea birds and gulls were hovering above the struggling creature, from time to time diving and pecking it.

"What in the world can it be?" cried Frank.

"We might go and see, but the professor is wet and should get back to the ship," said Ben.

"Oh, my dear sir, don't mind me," demurred that individual. "If I could have a little more of the stimulant—ah, thank you—as I was saying, I am never in a hurry to go anywhere when there is an interesting question of natural history to be solved."

"Very well, then," said Ben, heading the boat about; "if you catch cold, don't blame me."

"Oh dear, no. I wouldn't think of such a thing," said the professor, his eyes eagerly fixed on the disturbance of the birds.

"It's a big wounded albatross!" suddenly exclaimed Billy, as the boat drew near to the object the other birds were attacking.

"So it is," cried Harry.

"A monster, too," supplemented the professor. "It would be a great find for any collection."

"Perhaps we can catch it and stuff it," cried Billy.

"Perhaps so; but we must hurry or the others will have pecked it to bits."

The boat flew through the water, and soon they were near enough to drive the other birds away. The wounded albatross, however, did not rise, but lay flapping on the ice.

"Why, bless my soul, how very extraordinary!" cried the professor, forgetting his wet clothes and his chill in his excitement.

"What is?" asked Frank.

"Why something seems to be holding the bird down under water," was the answer.

"It's a string!" suddenly cried Ben, standing up in the stern of the boat.

"A string?" echoed the professor.

"Sure enough," was the reply.

And so it proved. The albatross was held down by a bit of string encircling its neck so tightly as to almost choke it, and which had become caked with ice till it was quite heavy.

"I know that bird," shouted the professor, suddenly, as they drew alongside it.

"You know it?" echoed the others, thinking the old man had taken leave of his senses.

"Yes, yes," cried the professor. "It's the one that nearly dragged me overboard. See whether the wire loop is still round its neck."

"It sure is," exclaimed Ben, as, disregarding the pecks of the big bird, he dragged it struggling into the boat and pinioned its wings.

"Well, this is a most extraordinary happening," smiled the professor, as happy as if he had been left a million dollars. "This will be most interesting to scientists and will make my name famous. 'The Sandburr albatross, which flew many scores of miles with my lasso round its neck.' Wonderful. Poor creature. I suppose as it dipped into the waves for its food a thin film of ice formed on the cord till it grew too heavy for it to carry."

"That's right," said Ben, who had cut the lasso and released the creature from its hampering weight. "I'll bet this weighs ten or twelve pounds."

He held out a huge chunk of ice for their inspection.

"That's great weight for a bird to carry so many miles," said Frank.

"It is, indeed," said the professor, patting the bound albatross on the head. "That makes it all the more remarkable."

"What are you going to do with the albatross, now that you have him?" inquired Billy Barnes.

"I must make a cage for him out of packing cases, and perhaps we can tame him," said the professor.

All agreed that this would be an interesting experiment, and the boat pulled back to the ship with one passenger more than she had left it with. As for the professor, he was in the seventh heaven of delight all the way back.

He sat on a stern seat by the albatross, which was looking wildly about, and kept talking to it as if he thought it could understand him.

"Ah, my beauty, I'll astonish Professor Tapper with you when I get home," he said; "you are worthy to be ranked with the fur-bearing South Polar pollywog. I will feed you till your feathers shine and you are the envied of all birds. I am the most fortunate man in the world."

All hands enjoyed a hearty laugh as, on the return to the ship, their adventures were narrated.

"The poor professor never seems to go out but what he gets into some pickle or other," laughed Captain Barrington, who was joined in his merriment by Captain Hazzard. "But, dear me," he went on, "where is the professor?"

They ran out on deck and found the man of science seated in the boat, which had not yet been hauled up, as the vessels were not to weigh anchor till the next day,—the berth where they lay being a snug one.

"Why don't you come on board, professor?" asked Captain Hazzard, indicating the accommodation ladder, which had been lowered.

"I-I'd like to, but I can't," responded the professor.

"You can't? Why, what on earth do you mean? You'll freeze to death down there," roared Captain Barrington.

"I wish you'd send down a small stove," wailed the scientist.

"A small stove; why, what do you want with that?"

"Why the fact is, I'm sozzen to the feet—I mean frozen to the seat, and if you can't send down a stove, send down another pair of trousers!" was the calm reply.

When the perfect tempest of laughter at the poor professor's expense had subsided, he was hauled to the deck in the boat and handed a long coat. Only till then would he consent to get up from the seat, an operation which was attended by a loud sound of ripping and tearing.

"Ha, ha, ha," roared Captain Hazzard. "First the professor nearly loses his life, and then he loses his trousers!"

CHAPTER XIX.

FACING THE POLAR NIGHT.

After steaming for several hours the next day, the Great Barrier opened into a small bight with shelving shores, which seemed to promise an easy landing place. A boat party, including the professor and the boys, was organized and the pull to the shore begun, after the two ships had swung to anchor.

The beach was a shelving one, formed of what seemed broken-off portions of volcanic rock. A short distance back from the shore there were several rocky plateaus, clear of snow, which seemed to offer a

good site for pitching camp. From the height, too, the boys could see, at no great distance, stretched out on the snow, several dark forms that looked not unlike garden slugs at that distance.

"What are they?" asked Billy.

"Seals," replied the professor; "though of what variety I do not know, and it is impossible to tell at this distance."

Captain Barrington and Captain Hazzard, after viewing the landing place and its surroundings, decided that a better spot could hardly be found, and the men were set to work at once marking out a site for the portable hut, which was to form the main eating and dwelling place, and the smaller structure in which the officers of the expedition were to make their homes.

The work of setting up the main hut, which had double walls, the space between being filled with cork dust and felt, was soon accomplished, and it was then divided off into small rooms. In the center a big table was set up and at one end a huge stove was placed for heating and cooking. At the other end the acetylene gas-plant, for providing light during the antarctic night, was provided. A big porch provided means of entrance and egress. This porch was fitted with double doors to prevent any cold air or snow being driven into the house when it was opened.

Captain Barrington and Captain Hazzard each had a small hut, another was shared by Doctor Gregg and the first officer, while the boys and the professor occupied still another. The engineer and Ben Stubbs were placed in charge of the main hut, in which the twelve men who were to be left behind after the Brutus sailed north, were to find quarters.

When everything had been fixed in position, a task that took more than a week, the work of unloading the provisions and supplies was begun. The cases which did not hold perishable goods, or ones likely to be affected by cold, were piled about the walls of the main hut as an additional protection against snow and cold. The glass jars of fruit and others of the supplies were stored inside the main hut, where they could be kept from freezing. The various scientific instruments of the expedition were stored in the huts occupied by Captain Barrington and Captain Hazzard. These huts, as well as the one occupied by the boys and Professor Sandburr, were all warmed by a system of hot-air pipes leading from the main stove in the hut. Specially designed oil heaters were also provided. A short distance away the aeroplane shed or "hanger" was set up.

The coal, wood, oil and fuel the expedition would need in its long sojourn were stored in a canvas and wood shelter some distance from the main camp, so as to avoid any danger of fire. When all was completed and big steel stays passed above the roofs of the huts to keep them in position, even in the wildest gale, a tall flag-pole, brought for the purpose, was set up and the Stars and Stripes hoisted.

While all these preparations had been going on, the boys and the professor had made several hunting trips over the ice and snow in the neighborhood of the camp. Some little distance back from the barrier they had been delighted to find two small lakes, connected by a narrow neck of water, which they promptly christened Green Lake. The water in these was warmish, and the professor said he had little doubt it was fed by volcanic springs.

The lakes swarmed with seals, and the boys' first seal hunt was an experience they were not likely to forget. Armed with light rifles, they and the professor set out for the seal grounds one morning on which the thermometer recorded seven degrees below zero. All wore their antarctic suits, however, and none felt the cold, severe as it was.

As they neared the seal grounds the soft-eyed creatures raised their heads and regarded them with mild astonishment. A few of them dived into the waters of Green Lake, but the rest stood their ground.

"There is one with a young one," shouted the professor, suddenly. "I must have it. I will tame it."

He dashed upon the mother seal, who promptly raised herself up and struck the professor a violent blow with her fin.

The professor was caught off his guard and, losing his footing, staggered back several steps. As he did so Frank cried a note of warning. The steep icy bank above Green Lake was below the scientist's heel. Before he had time to heed the boys' warning cry the professor, with a yell of amazement, slid backwards into the green pool, from which he emerged, blowing and puffing as if he had been a seal. Luckily, the water was warm and he suffered no serious consequences, but thereafter he was much more careful.

The boys could not bring themselves to kill the seals that seemed so gentle and helpless, but some of the men acted as butchers later on, for seal meat is a valuable ration in the antarctic.

"Wait till you lads encounter a leopard seal, or a sea elephant," said Captain Hazzard, when the boys confided their scruples to him.

"Sea leopards!" exclaimed Frank.

"Sea elephants!" echoed Harry.

"Yes, certainly," laughed the captain. "The creatures are well named, too. The sea leopard is as formidable as his namesake on land. The sea elephant is his big brother in size and ferocity."

"I shall give them a wide berth," said the professor. "That killer whale was enough for me."

"You will be wise, too," was the rejoinder, and the captain turned to busy himself with his books and papers, for this conversation occurred about noon in his hut.

The next day there were good-byes to be said. The polar winter was near at hand, when the sea for miles beyond the barrier would freeze solid and it would have been foolhardy for the Brutus, which had discharged all her coal but that necessary to steam north with, to have remained longer. She sailed early in the morning, bearing with her letters to their friends in the north, which the boys could not help thinking might be the last they would ever write them. Unknown perils and adventures lay before them. How they would emerge from them they did not know.

All experienced a feeling of sadness as the ship that had gallantly towed them into their polar berth lessened on the horizon, and then vanished altogether in the direction of the north. The Southern Cross alone remained now, but she was no longer their floating home, most of her stores and comforts having been removed to the shore. Her boilers were emptied and piping disconnected in preparation for her sojourn in the ice.

With so much to be done, however, the adventurers could not long feel melancholy, even though they knew their letters from home would not reach them till the arrival of the relief ship late in the next autumn.

The first duty tackled by Captain Hazzard was to call all the members of the expedition into the main hut and give them a little talk on the dangers, difficulties and responsibilities that lay before them. The men cheered him to the echo when he had finished, and each set about the duties assigned to him. Ben Stubbs was ordered to set the watches for the nights and adjust any minor details that might occur to him.

"I want to speak to you boys for a minute," said Captain Hazzard, as he left the hut and returned to his own.

Wondering what he could have to say to them the boys followed him.

"As you boys know, we are not alone in our anxiety to reach the pole," he began. "There is another nation anxious to achieve the glory also. How much of our plans they have gained possession of, I do not know. No doubt, not as much as they would have in their possession if the Jap had not been captured. I am pretty confident that they know nothing of the treasure ship, for instance. But it is probable that they will watch us, as they have some suspicion that we are after more than the pole itself, and have an ulterior object."

"Then you think that the Japanese expedition has landed?" asked Frank.

"They must have, if they made any sort of time," replied Captain Hazzard. "Our own progress down the coast was very slow, and they have probably established a camp already."

"Where?"

"That, of course, I have no means of knowing," was the reply. "I suppose that they are somewhere to the west of us, however. What I wanted to impress on you, however, is that some time ago a big dirigible was purchased abroad, and it is believed that it was for the use of the Japanese polar expedition, as it had means provided specially to warm the gas and prevent its condensation in extremely cold climates."

The boys nodded, but did not interrupt.

"It would be an easy matter for them to scout in such a ship and maybe discover our camp," said the captain. "For that reason I want to ask you boys to set an extra night watch of your own. Nobody else need know anything about it. I feel that I can rely on you more than any of the other subordinates of the expedition, excepting Ben Stubbs, and he is too busy to do everything."

The boys willingly agreed to keep out a watch for any airship that might appear, although privately they thought it was a bit of extra caution that was unnecessary.

"I don't see why any one who could keep out of the cold at night, would want to go scooting around in an airship in the dark for," said Billy, when they were all seated in their own hut.

"Captain Hazzard knows best," said Frank, shortly. "You and Harry had better take the first watch tonight, and I and—"

He stopped, puzzled. Who was to take the other watch with him? After some reflection they decided on asking the captain if a colored man, who acted as cook, couldn't be placed on to be Frank's companion. He was the only person they could think of whose duties would permit him to take the job, as his duties were only to cook for the officers, and were consequently light.

Moreover, he was a trustworthy man and not likely to gossip if he saw anything strange. Captain Hazzard readily gave his consent to the colored man, whose name was Rastus Redwing, being Frank's companion on the night watch.

"We can have our breakfast cooked by the other man," he said, "and then all Rastus will have to do will be to prepare lunch and dinner and extra pay."

But Rastus, when the plan was broached to him, was by no means so willing.

"Wha' me tramp, tramp, tramp roun' in dat dar ice and snow all de night time?" he gasped. "Laws a me Massa Frank, wha' kin' of man yo all tink dese yar darky am?"

"It only means a few hours' more work, and you get double pay for it," said Frank.

"Oh-ho, dat alters de circumference ob de question," said Rastus, scratching his head, when this had been explained to him. "All right, Massa Frank, yo' count on me at twelve to-night fo' sho."

"Very well," said Frank. "I shall—and see that you are there."

"Ah'll be dar, don' you nebbe fear fo' dat," chuckled the colored man. "Huh-huh double pay and no brakfus' ter git. Dat's what I calls LIVIN'—yas, sah."

As Frank, well pleased at having adjusted the business of the night watches so easily, was striding over the snow-powdered rocks toward the boys' hut, he heard a sudden disturbance behind the main hut and loud cries of:

"Help! help!"

The person who was uttering them seemed to be in great distress and was apparently in dire need of aid.

"It's the professor," shouted Frank, as the cries were repeated. "Whatever can have happened to him now."

As he spoke, the professor came dashing toward the camp, his arms were outstretched as if in entreaty, and his long legs going up and down like piston rods, at such speed was he running.

"Whatever is that caught to his coat tails?" exclaimed Frank, as he saw that a large, heavy creature of some kind was clinging fast to the flying professor's garment.

CHAPTER XX.

A MYSTERIOUS LIGHT.

"Take him off,—take him off. If I were not running he'll bite me," shrieked the scientist as he sped along.

"Whatever is it?" shouted Frank, regarding the strange sight with amazement.

"It's a sea-leopard. Ouch!—he bit me then. Shoot him or something," screamed the professor, scooting round in circles like a professional runner; for he knew that if he stopped the creature would surely nip him hard.

Frank hastily ran into the hut for his rifle and returned in a moment followed by the others. Half the occupants of the camp were out by this time to watch the outcome of the professor's quandary.

Frank raised his rifle and took careful aim—or as careful aim as he could with the professor rushing along at such a pace, but even as the rifle cracked the professor tripped on a snow hummock and down he came. The yell he set up echoed back from the naked, rocky crags that towered at the back of the camp.

"Don't holler so, the creature's dead," cried Frank, as he and the boys came running up to where the recumbent professor lay howling in the snow.

"Oh, dear, I do seem to have the worst luck," moaned the scientist. "First, I'm nearly drowned by a killer whale, then I'm almost pollowed by a swenguin—no, I mean swallowed by a penguin, and now a sea leopard attacks me."

As he spoke the professor got to his feet and the dead sea-leopard, as he called it, fell over on the snow. It was a ponderous creature, much like a seal, but with huge tusks and a savage expression, even in death. It was about five feet in length.

"What made it tackle you?" asked Harry.

"I was down by the beach collecting some curious specimens of polar sea-slugs, when I felt a tug at my coat-tails," said the scientist. "I looked round and saw this creature glaring at me."

"Why didn't you shoot at it?" asked Billy, noting the outline of the professor's revolver under his coattail.

"I had placed a specimen of antarctic star-moss in the barrel of my revolver for safe-keeping, and didn't wish to disturb it," explained the professor; "so I thought the best thing to do under the circumstances was to run. I never dreamed the creature would cling on."

"Well it did, and like a bull-dog, too," said Billy.

"We'll have to be careful and not get snarled up with any sea-leopards," said Harry, who had been examining the dead animal. "Look at the monster's tusks."

"Yes, he could make a fine meal off any of you boys," remarked the professor.

Suddenly he fell on his knees beside the sea-leopard and began examining it carefully.

"What in the world are you doing, now?" asked Frank.

"I thought I might find a sea-leopard flea," was the response of the engrossed scientist.

"Ah," he exclaimed, making a sudden dart; "here is one, a beauty, too. Ah, ha, my fine fellow, no use your wriggling, I have you fast."

As he spoke he drew out one of the bottles of which receptacles his pockets seemed to be always full, and popped the sea-leopard flea into it.

"That will be a very valuable addition to science," he said, looking round triumphantly.

A few days after this incident the polar night began to shut down in grim earnest. Sometimes for days the boys and the other adventurers would be confined to the huts. Entertainments were organized and phonograph concerts given, and, when it was possible to venture out, hunting trips in a neighboring seal-ground were attempted. All these things helped to while away the monotony of the long darkness. In the meantime the commanders of the expedition laid their plans for the spring campaign, when the boys' aerial dash was to be made.

On one of the milder nights, when Frank and Rastus were on watch, their first intimation that a strange and mysterious presence shared their lonely vigil was made manifest. It was Rastus who called Frank's attention to what was eventually to prove a perplexing puzzle to the pole hunters.

As the colored man and Frank were pacing outside the huts, keeping their watch, the negro suddenly gripped the boy's arm.

"Fo' de lub ob goodness, man, wha's dat?" he exclaimed, getting as pale as it is possible for a negro to become.

"What?" demanded the boy. "I can't see anything."

He stared about him in the gloom.

"Ain't nuffin ter SEE," rejoined Rastus, in a low, awed tone. "But, hark!"

The negro's ears, sharper than those of the white boy, had caught a sound that later became audible to Frank.

It was a most peculiar sound.

Coming from no one direction that one could indicate with certainty, it seemed to fill the whole air with a buzzing noise that beat almost painfully on the eardrums.

While he gazed about, in perplexity at the phenomenon, Frank suddenly descried something that almost startled him into an outcry.

In the sky far to the westward and, seemingly, high in the air, there hovered a bright light!

The next instant it vanished so suddenly as to leave some doubt in the boy's mind as to whether he had really seen it,—and, if he had, if it might not have been a star or some other heavenly body.

He turned to his companion.

"Rastus, did you see a light in the sky there a second ago?"

The boy pointed in the direction in which the mystery had appeared.

"A light—?" repeated the puzzled negro, still scared at the buzzing sound, which had now ceased. "You done say a light—a reg'lar LIGHT, light?"

"Yes, yes," impatiently; "did you see one?"

"No, sah, no, indeedy," was the indignant response; "ah don' see no lights."

"That's strange," said Frank, half to himself. "You are quite sure?"

Again the negro denied all knowledge of having beheld such a thing.

"Ef ah'd done seed anyfing lak dat," he declared; "ah'd hev bin skedaddlin' fer ther hut lak er chicken wif a hungry coon afta' it,—yas, sah."

Thoroughly convinced that his imagination had played him a trick, Frank did not mention the incident, to his fellow adventurers and soon almost forgot it. It was recalled to his mind in a startling manner a few nights later.

This time it was Rastus that saw the strange light, and the yell that he set up alarmed the entire camp.

"Oh, Lordy—oo-o-o-ow, Lawdy!" he shrieked; "ah done see a ghosess way up in dar sky, Massa Frank!"

Frank seized the black by the arm, as he started to run.

"What do you mean, you big black coward," he exclaimed. "What's the matter with you?"

"Oh, dat dar light," wailed Rastus. "Dat ain't no human light dat ain't; dat light's a way up in dar sky. It's a polar ghosess, dat's wha' dat is—de ghos' ob some dead sailor."

"Don't talk nonsense," sharply ordered Frank, as the others, hastily bundled in their furs, came rushing out.

"Whatever is the matter?" demanded Captain Hazzard, gazing sternly at the trembling negro.

"Oh, Massa Hazzard, ah done see a ghos' light in dar sky," he yelled.

"Silence, sir, and stop that abominable noise. Frank, what do you know about this?"

"Only that I really believe he saw such a thing, sir."

"What, a light in the sky!" echoed Captain Barrington. "Did you see it, too?"

"Not to-night, sir."

"Then it has appeared before?"

"Yes, it has," was the reply.

"But you said nothing of it," exclaimed Captain Hazzard.

"No; I thought it might be imagination. It appeared for such a short time that I could not be certain if it was not a trick of the imagination."

"Well, it begins to look as if Rastus is telling the truth," was the officer's comment.

"Yas, sah, yas sah, I'se tellin' de truf, de whole truf, and everything but de truf," eagerly stuttered the negro.

"Where did you first see the light?" demanded Captain Hazzard.

"Right ober de grable (gable) ob de ruuf ob de big hut," was the reply.

"That's about where I saw it," burst out Frank.

"Was it stationary?" asked Captain Hazzard.

"Yas, sah; it's station was airy, dat's a fac'," grinned Rastus. "It was high up in de air."

"That's not what I mean, at all," snapped Captain Hazzard. "Was it moving or standing still?"

"Oh, ah see what yo' mean, Captain Hazzard,—no, sir, der was no circumlocution ob de objec', in fac', sah, it was standin' still."

"For how long did you watch it?"

"Wall, sah, it jes flash lak de wink ob an eye and den it was gone."

"Possibly it was some sort of antarctic lightning-bug," ventured the professor, who had been intently listening to the account of the strange light.

"Hardly likely," smiled Captain Barrington. "Tell us, Rastus, what it looked most like to you—what did it resemble?"

"Wall, sah, it presembled mos'ly dat big laight what yo' see on a snortermobile befo' it runs ober you. Yas, sah, Cap't Barranton, dat's what it looked lak, fo' sho."

"Does that tally with your impression of it, Frank?" asked Captain Hazzard.

"Yes, sir, Rastus has put it very well. It was more like an automobile headlight than anything else."

"Well, nobody could be driving an automobile in the sky," put in the professor, decisively, as if the matter were disposed of in this way without any more argument being wasted.

"No, but there are other vehicles that are capable of rising above the earth," spoke Captain Hazzard, thoughtfully.

"For instance—?" breathed Frank, with a half-formed idea of what he meant.

"For instance, airships," was the quiet reply.

"Airships," exclaimed Captain Barrington. "Then you think—?"

"That we have some very undesirable neighbors at close quarters," rejoined Captain Hazzard.

CHAPTER XXI.

A PENGUIN HUNT.

Although, as may be imagined, a closer watch than ever was kept during the period of darkness, nothing more was seen that winter of the mysterious light. The dim twilight preceding spring began to appear in February without there being any recurrence of the mysterious incident. The coming of the season in which they hoped to accomplish such great things, found the camp of the adventurers in splendid trim. Everyone from Captain Hazzard down to the professor's albatross, which by this time had become quite tame, was in fine health, and there had been not the slightest trace of illness among the adventurers.

The motor-sledge was put together as soon as the September spring began to advance, and was found to work perfectly. As it has not been described in detail hitherto, a few words may be devoted to it at this point.

It was a contrivance, about twenty feet long by three wide, supported on hollow "barrels" of aluminum. The sledge itself was formed of a vanadium steel frame with spruce planking, and was capable of carrying a load of a thousand pounds at thirty miles an hour over even the softest snow, as its cylindrical supports did not sink into the snow as ordinary wheels would have done. The motor was a forty-horse power automobile machine with a crank-case enclosed in an outer case in which a vacuum had been created—on the principle of the bottles which keep liquids cold or warm. In this instance the vacuum served to keep the oil in the crank-case, which was poured in warm, at an even temperature. The gasoline tank, which held twenty gallons, was also vacuum-enclosed, and as an additional precaution the warm gases from the exhaust were inducted around it, and the space used for storing extra cans of fuel.

Specially prepared oils and a liberal mixing of alcohol with the gasoline afforded a safeguard against any sudden freezing of the vital fluids. The engine was, of course, jacketed, but was air-cooled, as water circulation would have been impracticable in the polar regions.

The test of the weird-looking contrivance was made on a day in early spring, when, as far as the eye could reach, a great solid sea of ice spread to the northward, and to the south only a vast expanse of snowy level was visible,—with far in the distance the outlines of some mountains which, in Captain Hazzard's belief, guarded the plateau on the summit of which perhaps lay the South Pole.

The Southern Cross lay sheathed in ice, and the open sea, through which she had approached the Great Barrier, was now a solid ocean of glacial ice. If it did not break up as the spring advanced the prospect was bad for the adventurers getting out that year, but at this time they were too engrossed with other projects to give their ultimate release much thought.

But to return to the motor-sledge. With Frank at the steering wheel in front and Harry, Billy Barnes, the professor, and Rastus distributed about its "deck," it was started across the snow, amid a cheer from the men, without a hitch. So splendidly did it answer that the boys drove on and on over the white wastes without giving much thought to the distance they traversed.

With the return of spring, Skua gulls and penguins had become plentiful and in answer to the professor's entreaties the boys finally stopped the sledge near a rookery of the latter, in which the queer birds were busy over the nests. These nests are rough piles of stones, on which the eggs are laid. Soon the chickens—fuzzy little brown creatures—appear, and there is a lot of fuss in the rookery; the penguins getting their families mixed and fighting furiously over each small, bewildered chick.

It was egg-laying time, however, when the boys rolled up on their queer motor-sledge to the neighborhood of the breeding ground the professor had espied. The man of science was off the sledge in a trice, and while the boys, who wished to examine the motor, remained with the vehicle, he darted off for the penguins' habitat.

With him went Rastus, carrying a large basket, which the professor had ordered him to bring in case they needed it to carry back any finds of interest.

"Perfusser, is dem dar penguins good ter eat?" asked Rastus, as he and his learned companion strode through the snow to the rookery.

"They are highly esteemed as food," was the reply. "Former expeditions to the South Pole have eaten them and declare that their flesh is as good as chicken."

"As good as chicking!" exclaimed Rastus, delightedly. "My, my, yo' make mah mouf watah. Don' you fink we could ketch one an' hev a fricassee, perfusser?"

"I am only going in search of eggs and would, of course, like to catch a flea—a penguin-flea, I mean,"

said the professor; "and I should not advise you to meddle with any of the creatures, Rastus."

"Why, dey look as tame as elingfants in de Zoo," protested the colored man, as he gazed at the penguins, who in turn gazed back at him with their beady black eyes.

"Yes, and ordinarily they are, but in the breeding season they get savage if molested, although it is safe enough to walk among them."

"Huh," grunted Rastus to himself; "dis yer perfusser am a fusser fer sho. Ef dem birds tas' lak chicking ah'm a-goin 'ter ketch one while he's a huntin' fer fleas and other foolishnesseses."

"What's that you said, Rastus?" inquired the professor, as they began to thread their way among the piles of stones, each of which marked a nest.

"Ah said de perfusser am a wonderful man wid his fleas and other scientificnesses," rejoined the colored man.

"Ah, Rastus," cried the professor, highly flattered; "if I can only catch the fur-bearing pollywog, then I shall, indeed, have some claim on fortune and fame, till then—let us hunt penguin eggs."

In the meantime the boys were busy examining the motor. They found that the specially prepared oil worked perfectly and that, although it changed color in the low temperature, it showed no disposition to freeze. The gasolene, too, was successfully kept at the right temperature by means of the vacuum casing of the tank.

"We could go to the pole itself in this motor-sledge," cried Billy, enthusiastically.

"How would we pass the mountains?" asked Frank, pointing to the south, where stood the snowy sentinels guarding the mystery of the Antarctic.

"That's so," agreed Billy, hurriedly. "That's a job for the Golden Eagle."

"And she's going to do it, too," rejoined Frank, earnestly. "That is if it is humanly possible."

"You bet she is," began Harry, enthusiastically.

"Hullo, what's happened to the professor now?" he broke off.

Indeed, it seemed that some serious trouble had again overtaken the luckless naturalist.

"Oh, boys! boys!" came his cries from the direction of the penguin rookery. "Help! The menguins are plurdering us—I mean the penguins are murdering us!"

"Fo' de Lawd's sake, come quick!" came a yell in Rastus's tones. "We're done bin eated alive by dese yar pencilguins."

The rookery lay in a slight depression and was not visible from where the boys stood, so that they were unable to imagine what was taking place.

"They are in serious trouble of some sort again," cried Frank. "Come on, boys, let's go to their rescue."

The motor-sledge was soon speeding over the snow and in a few minutes was at the edge of the declivity in which lay the penguin rookery. Gazing down into it the boys could hardly keep from laughing.

Indeed, Billy did burst into loud roars of merriment as he beheld the strange figures cut by the professor and Rastus, as they strove to escape the onslaught of the whole colony of penguins, which, with sharp shrieks of rage were attacking them with their beaks and beating them with their wings.

[Illustration: "They Strove to Escape the Onslaught of the Penguins."]

"Oh, please, good Mistah Pencilguins, I didn't mean no harm," roared Rastus, who seemed to think the human-looking birds could understand him. "Go afta' de perfusser, it was him dat tole me youalls tasted lak chicking."

"Stop that, you greedy black rascal," retorted the professor, laying about him with the egg-basket. "If you hadn't tried to grab that penguin we wouldn't have been in this trouble."

This was true enough. The penguins had not seemed to resent their nests being interfered with at all,

but had gathered round the invaders with much curiosity. The trouble all originated when Rastus had sneaked up to a small penguin while the professor was busy extracting an egg from a nest, and with a cry of:

"Oh, you lubly lilly chickin, ah hev yo fer supper, sho nuff," had grabbed the creature.

It instantly sent up a loud cry of fear and rage, which its mates seemed to regard as a battle cry, for they all fell on the rash invaders of their realm at once.

As the boys dashed down the snowbank into the rookery, with their revolvers drawn, the professor, with a loud yell, fell backward into a well-filled nest. He arose with yellow yolks streaming from him and covered with down, feathers and eggshell, that made him look like a spectacled penguin himself. Rastus fared no better and was being beaten and pecked unmercifully when the boys rushed down to the rescue.

"Fire your revolvers in the air!" cried Frank. "Don't kill the poor things."

"Fo' goodness sake kill dis big feller dat's a-peckin' mah nose off!" yelled Rastus, struggling on the ground in the midst of a mass of broken eggs.

The fusillade that went up from the boys' pistols made the penguins stop their attack and waddle off in affright, while the professor and Rastus, both sorry figures, scrambled to their feet and tried to brush off some of the eggshells and yellow yolks that covered them from head to foot.

"Come on back to the auto," cried Frank, when he saw they were safe.

"What, aren't you going to kill some of the birds?" demanded the professor.

"No, certainly not," replied Frank. "What for?"

"Why they attacked us and frightened the life out of me," protested the professor.

"An' dem pesky pencilguins mos' bited mah nose off," roared Rastus, rubbing that not over prominent feature.

"Well, you had no business in their rookery, anyhow," rejoined Frank, unfeelingly. "Why did you go?"

"Why, my dear sir," said the professor, regarding him with sorrowful egg-stained countenance; "in the interests of science, of course. We would not have been attacked at all if Rastus had not tried to catch a penguin. What for, I cannot imagine."

"Why, perfusser, you done say dey tas' lak chickin," ruefully cried the black man.

"Did I?" exclaimed the man of science. "Well, bless my soul, so I did. That was very foolish of me. I ought to have known that Rastus would not be able to resist such an idea."

"Ah dunno 'bout de idah," observed Rastus, as he cranked up the machine, and the boys and the professor climbed on board; "but ah couldn' resis' de chicking."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FLAMING MOUNTAIN.

A few days after the events described in the last chapter, Captain Hazzard summoned the boys to him and informed them that it was time to start out and establish "depots" for the storing of food and blankets as far as was practicable, in the direction of the pole. This was in order that any parties sent out to explore might not run the chance of being lost in the antarctic snows without having some place to which they could retreat. The "depots" were to be marked as rapidly as they were made with tall bamboo poles, each of which bore a black flag.

The boys pitched in to this occupation with great enthusiasm and, with the aid of the motor-sledge, soon had established three depots, covering a radius of some eighty miles from the camp. This work brought them to the verge of the chain of snow-mountains, beyond whose white crests they believed lay the pole. Somewhere along the coast line of this chain of mountains, too, so the lieutenant calculated,

lay the Viking ship, which, in the years that had elapsed since the whalers had seen her, must have drifted towards their bases on the ever-shifting polar currents. For the Great Barrier, solid as it seems, is not stationary, and many scientists hold that it is subject to violent earthquakes, caused by the subsidence of great areas of icy land into the boiling craters of polar volcanoes.

A careful study of the position, in which the whalers set down they had spied the ship, and a calculation of the polar drift during the time that had elapsed from their discovery, had enabled Captain Hazzard to come, as he believed, very nearly locating the exact situation of the mysterious vessel.

"Somewhere to the southeast, at the foot of the snow-mountains, I firmly believe that we shall find her," he said.

It was a week after the establishment of the last depot that the boys were ready to make their first flight in polar regions. The Golden Eagle's vacuum tank and crank-case were attached and a supply of non-freezing oils and gasoline drums, carefully covered with warm felt, taken on board.

"Your instructions are," were Captain Hazzard's parting words, "to fly to the southward for a distance of a hundred miles or so, but no further. You will report the nature of the country and bring back your observations made with the instruments."

The Golden Eagle, which had been assembled earlier in the spring, was wheeled out of her shed and, after a brief "grooming," was ready for her first flight in the antarctic regions.

"It seems queer," observed Frank, "to be flying an aeroplane, that has been through so many tropical adventures, in the frozen regions of the south pole."

"It does, indeed," said the professor, who, with Billy Barnes, had obtained permission to accompany the boys.

Captain Hazzard, himself, would have come but that he and Captain Barrington had determined to make surveys of the ice surrounding the Southern Cross, in order to decide whether the ship had a speedy chance of delivery from her frozen bondage.

The Golden Eagle shot into the icy air at exactly ten minutes past nine on the morning of the 28th of September. It was a perfect day, with the thermometer registering 22 above zero. So accustomed had they become to the bitter cold of the polar winter that even this low temperature seemed oppressive to the boys, and they wore only their ordinary leather aviation garments and warm underclothes. A plentiful supply of warm clothing was, however, taken along in case of need. Plenty of provisions and a specially contrived stove for melting snow into water were also carried, as well as blankets and sleeping bags.

The shout of farewell from the sojourners at the camp had hardly died out before the aviators found themselves flying at a height of three hundred feet above the frozen wastes. Viewed from that height, the aspect stretched below them was, indeed, a desolate one. As far as the eye could reach was nothing but the great whiteness. Had it not been for the colored snow goggles they wore the boys might have been blinded by the brilliancy of the expanse, as cases of snow blindness are by no means uncommon in the Antarctic.

On and on they flew toward the mighty snow mountains which towered like guardian giants ahead of them. The barograph showed that after some hours of flying they had now attained a height of two thousand feet, which was sufficient to enable them to clear the ridge. Viewed from above, the snow mountains looked like any other mountains. They were scarred by gullies and valleys in the snow, and only the lack of vegetation betrayed them as frozen heaps. Perhaps not mountains in the ordinary sense at all, but simply mighty masses of ice thrown up by the action of the polar drift.

"Look, look," quavered Billy Barnes, as they cleared the range and their eyes fell on the expanse beyond.

The boy's exclamation had been called forth by the sight of an immense mountain far to the southward of them.

From its summit was emerging a cloud of black smoke.

"A volcano!" exclaimed Frank, in blank astonishment.

"Such another as Mount Erebus and Mount Terror, also within the antarctic circle, but not either of which is as big as this one. I should imagine," said the professor. "Boys, let us head for it," he

exclaimed; "it must be warm in the vicinity of the crater and perhaps we may find some sort of life existent there. Even the fur-bearing pollywog may reside there. Who knows?"

All agreed, without much argument, that it came within the scope of their duties to investigate the volcano, and they soon were winging toward it. As they neared the smoking cone they observed that its sides were formed of some sort of black stone, and with that, mingled with the smoke that erupted from its mouth, came an occasional burst of flame.

"It's in eruption," gasped Billy. "We'd better not get too near to it."

"I apprehend no danger," said the professor. "Both Scott and Shackleton and our own Wilkes examined the craters of Mounts Erebus and Terror, when steam and flames were occasionally spurting from them, without suffering any bad consequences."

Acting on the professor's advice the aeroplane was grounded at a point some distance from the summit of the mountain, on a small flat plateau. The warmth was perceptible, and some few stunted bushes and trees clung to the sides of the flaming mountain. The professor was delighted to find, flitting among the vegetation, a small fly with pink and blue wings, which he promptly christened the *Sanburritis Antarcticitis Americanus*. He netted it without difficulty and popped it into a camphor bottle and turned, with the boys, to regarding the mountain.

"Let's climb it and examine the crater," exclaimed Frank, suddenly, the instinct of the explorer strong in him.

"Bully," cried Billy; "I'm on."

"And me," exploded Harry.

"I should dearly love to," spoke the professor; "perhaps we can discover some more strange insects at the summit."

The climb was a tedious one, even with the aid of the rope they had brought with them from the Golden Eagle; and with which part of the party hauled the others over seemingly impassable places. At last, panting, and actually perspiring in the warm air, they stood on the lip of the crater and gazed down.

It was an awe-inspiring sight.

The crater was about half-a-mile across the top, and its rocky sides glowed everywhere with the glare of the subterranean fires. A reek of sulphurous fumes filled the air and made the adventurers feel dizzy. They, therefore, worked round on the windward side of the crater, and after that felt no ill consequences.

For a long time they stood regarding the depths from which the heavy black smoke rolled up.

"There's no danger of an eruption, is there?" asked Billy, somewhat apprehensively.

"I don't apprehend so," rejoined the professor. "A survey of the sides of the crater convinces me that it is many years since the volcano was active."

"It is a wonderful feeling to think that we are the first human beings who have ever seen it," exclaimed Frank, impulsively.

"It is, indeed," agreed the professor. "This is a great discovery and we must take possession of it in the name of the United States. Let us call it Mount Hazzard in commemoration of this expedition."

And so with a cheer the great antarctic volcano was named in honor of the leader of the expedition.

At the foot of the flaming mountain, originated no doubt by the warmth, were numerous large lakes filled with water of a deep greenish blue hue.

"I wonder if there aren't some fish in those lakes?" wondered the professor, gazing at the bodies of water so far below them. "At any rate there may be some kinds of creatures there that are very uncommon. Conditions such as they must exist under would make them unlike any others on earth, provided the waters are inhabited."

"It's easy enough to see," said Frank.

"How so?"

"We can clamber down the mountain side and get in the aeroplane and fly down to examine the lakes," said the boy.

"Bless my soul, that's so," ejaculated the man of science. "Do you know, for a moment I had quite forgotten how it was possible to get here. That is a wonderful machine that you boys have there."

The climb down the mountain side was almost more difficult and dangerous than the ascent, but at last all, even the professor, were once more at the side of the Golden Eagle. They were soon on board, and in long spirals, Frank dropped to the earth, landing not far from the edge of one of the small lakes.

"How curiously honeycombed the rocks are," exclaimed Frank, as they got out of the craft.

Indeed the face of the cliff that towered above the lakes did present a singular appearance, there being myriads of holes in its face at a height of a few inches above the surface of the water.

"Doubtless some freak of the volcanic nature of the earth hereabouts," explained the professor; "but they do, indeed, look curious."

The water of the lake, on being tested, was found to be quite fresh and agreeable to the taste though it was warmish and seemed to have an admixture of iron in it. All about them—strangest freak of all—small geysers of hot water bubbled, sending up clouds of steam into the air.

"This is like an enchanted land," was Billy's comment, as he gazed about him. Indeed, what with the towering black mountain above them with its perpetual cloud of smoke hovering above its crest, the green lakes of warm water and the bubbling, steaming geysers, it did seem like another world than ours.

Some time was occupied by a thorough investigation of the small lake and the boys and their scientific companion then advanced on a larger one that lay at some distance.

"Do you think it is wise to go so far from the aeroplane?" asked Harry.

"Why, there's nothing here that could attack us," the professor was beginning, when he stopped short suddenly with an exclamation.

"Look there!" he exclaimed, pointing down at the ground. "A human track."

The boys looked and saw the imprint of a foot!

Yet, on inspection, it was unlike a human foot and seemed more like the track of a bear. Several other prints of a similar nature became visible now that they examined the spongy soil carefully.

"Whatever do you think it is?" Frank asked of the professor, who was examining the imprints with some care.

"I don't know, my dear boy," he replied. "It looks like the foot of a bear, and yet it appears to be webbed as if it might be that of some huge water animal."

"Yes, but look at the size of it," argued Billy. "Why, the animal whose foot that is must be an immense creature."

"It's certainly strange," mused the professor, "and suggests to me that we had better be getting back to our aeroplane."

"You think it is dangerous to remain here, then?" asked Harry, with some dismay.

"I do, yes," was the naturalist's prompt reply. "I do not know what manner of animal it can be that left that track, and I know the tracks of every known species of mammal."

"Perhaps some hitherto unknown creature made it," suggested Billy.

"That's just what I think, my boy," was the reply. "I have, as I said, not the remotest conception of what sort of a creature it could be, but I have an idea from the size of that track that it must be the imprint of a most formidable brute."

"Might it not be some prehistoric sort of creature like the mammoths of the north pole or the dinosaurs, or huge flying-lizard?" suggested Frank.

"I'm inclined to think that that is what the creature is," rejoined the scientist. "It would be most interesting to remain here and try to get a specimen, but in the position we are in at present we should

be cut off from the aeroplane in case an attack came from in front of us."

"That's so," agreed Frank. "Come on, boys, let's get a move on. We can come back here with heavy rifles some day, and then we can afford to take chances. I don't like the idea of facing what are possibly formidable monsters with only a pistol."

"My revolver can—," began Billy, drawing the weapon in question—when he stopped short.

The faces of all blanched as they, too, noted the cause of the interruption.

A harsh roar had suddenly filled the air, booming and reverberating against the gloomy cliffs like distant thunder.

Suddenly Billy, with a shout that was half a scream, called attention to the holes they had noticed at the foot of the acclivity.

"Look, look at that!" he chattered, his teeth clicking like castanets with sheer terror.

"We are lost!" shouted the professor, starting back with blanched cheeks.

From the strange holes they had previously noticed at the foot of the cliffs, dozens of huge creatures of a form and variety unknown to any in the party, were crawling and flopping into the lake.

That their intentions were hostile was evident. As they advanced in a line that would bring them between the boys and their aeroplane, they emitted the same harsh, menacing roar that had first started the adventurers.

"Run for your lives," shouted Frank, as the monsters cleaved the water, every minute bringing them nearer.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ADRIFT ABOVE THE SNOWS.

"Whatever are they?" gasped Billy, as they ran for the aeroplane.

"Prehistoric monsters," rejoined the professor, who was almost out of breath.

The next minute he stumbled on a bit of basalt and fell headlong. Had it not been for this accident they could have gained the aeroplane in time, but, as it was, the brief space it took to aid the scientist to his feet gave the creatures of the cliff a chance to intercept the little party.

As the creatures drew themselves out of the green warm water of the lake with hideous snarls the boys saw that the animals were great creatures that must have weighed several hundred pounds each and were coated with shaggy hair. Their heads and bodies were shaped not unlike seals except that they had huge tusks; but each monster had two short legs in front and a pair of large flippers behind. Their appearance was sufficiently hideous to alarm the most callous venturer into the Antarctic.

"We've got to make the aeroplane," exclaimed Frank, "come on, get your guns out and fire when I give the word. If we can only kill a few of them perhaps the rest will take fright."

"A good idea," assented the professor producing his revolver, a weapon that might have proved fatal to a butterfly, but certainly would not be of any effect against the shaggy foes they now faced.

"Fire!" cried Frank, when the others had their heavy magazine weapons ready.

A volley of lead poured into the ranks of the monsters and several of them, with horribly human shrieks, fled wounded toward the lake. A strong sickening odor of musk filled the air as the creatures bled.

But far from alarming the rest of the monsters the attack seemed to render them ten times more savage than before. With roars of rage they advanced toward the boys, making wonderful speed on their legs and flippers.

"Let 'em have it again," shouted Frank as he noted with anxiety that the first fusillade had been a failure, the rough coats and thick hide of the monsters deflecting the bullets.

Once more the adventurers emptied their pistols, but the shaggy coats of the great creatures still seemed to prevent the bullets doing any serious injury.

The boys' position was ominous indeed. An order from Frank to reload resulted in the discovery that he alone of any of the party had a belt full of cartridges; the others had all used up the few they had carried.

"We're goners sure," gasped Billy as the creatures hesitated before another scattering discharge of bullets, but still advanced, despite the fact that this time two were killed. Suddenly, however, their leader with a strange cry threw his head upward and seemed to sniff at the air as if in apprehension.

At the same instant a slight trembling of the ground on which the adventurers stood was perceptible.

"It's an earthquake," cried Billy, recollecting his experience in Nicaragua.

With wild cries the monsters all plunged into the lake. They seemed to be in terror. Behind them they left several of their wounded, the latter making pitiful efforts to reach the water.

"Whatever is going to happen?" cried Billy in dismay, at the animals' evident terror of some mysterious event that was about to transpire, and the now marked disturbance of the earth.

As he spoke, the earth shook violently once more and a rumbling sound like subterranean thunder filled the air.

"It's the mountain!" shouted the professor, who had been gazing about, "it's going to erupt."

From the crater they had explored there were now rolling up great masses of bright, yellow smoke in sharp contrast to the dark vapors that had hitherto poured from it. A mighty rumbling and roaring proceeded from its throat as the smoke poured out, and vivid, blue flames shot through the sulphurous smother from time to time.

"We've no time to lose," cried Frank, "come on, we must get to the aeroplane in a hurry."

They all took to their heels over the trembling ground, not stopping to gaze behind them. The monsters had all disappeared, and as they had not been seen to re-enter their holes they were assumed to be hiding at the bottom of the lake.

As the boys gained the aeroplane and clambered in, Frank uttered an exclamation:

"Where's the professor?"

In a few seconds they espied him carefully bending over the dead body of one of the slain monsters several yards away.

"Come on, professor," they shouted, "there's no time to lose."

"One second and I have him," the scientist called back.

At the same instant he made a dart at the dead creature's shaggy fur and appeared to grasp something. He hastily drew out a bottle and dropped whatever he had seized into it and then started leaping and bounding toward the aeroplane, his long legs looking like stilts as he advanced over the uneven ground.

He was just in time.

As the aeroplane left the ground the water in the lakes became violently agitated and steam arose from fissures in the mountain side. Flames shot up to a considerable height above the crater and a torrent of black lava began to flow toward the lakes, falling into them with a loud hissing sound that was audible to the boys, even after they had put many miles between themselves and the burning mountain.

"That will be the last of those monsters, I expect," remarked Harry as they flew steadily northward.

"I don't know," observed the professor, "they may have caves under water where they can keep cool. They evidently knew what to expect when they felt the first rumblings and shaking of the earth and must have had previous experience. I guess I was mistaken in thinking the volcano inactive."

"It was a piece of great good luck for us that the eruption came when it did," said Frank.

"It was a terrific one," commented Billy.

The professor laughed.

"Terrific," he echoed, "why, my boy, you ought to see a real eruption. This was nothing. See, the smoke is already dying down. It is over."

"Well, it may not have been a big one, but you were in a mighty hurry to get to the aeroplane," said Billy with a grin.

"That was so that I could get my volcano monster's flea back safe and sound," exclaimed the man of science. "See here."

He took from his pocket and held up a small bottle.

"Look there," he exclaimed in triumph.

"Well," said the others, who, all but Frank, who was steering, were regarding the naturalist.

"Well," he repeated somewhat querulously, "don't you see it?"

"See what?" asked Billy, after a prolonged scrutiny of the bottle.

"Why, the flea, the little insect I caught in the shaggy fur of the volcano monster?"

"No," cried both boys simultaneously.

The professor gazed at the bottle in a puzzled way.

"Bless my soul, you are right," he exclaimed, angrily, "the little creature eluded me. Oh, dear, this is a bitter day for science. I was in such a hurry to pop my specimen into the bottle that I held him carelessly and he evidently hopped away. Oh, this is a terrible, an irreparable, loss."

Although the boys tried to comfort him they could not. He seemed overcome by grief.

"Cheer up," said Billy at length, "remember there is always the fur-bearing pollywog to be captured."

"Ah, yes," agreed the professor, "but a bug in the hand is worth two in the air."

As they talked, there suddenly came a loud explosion from the engine and two of the cylinders went out of commission. The speed of the aeroplane at once decreased and she began to drop.

The dismay of the boys may be imagined. They were several miles from the camp and below them was nothing but the desolate expanse of the snow wastes that lay at the foot of the barrier range.

"Shall we have to go down?" asked Billy.

"Nothing else to do," said Frank with a grave face, "there's something wrong with the engine and we can't repair it up here. If we were not in this rarified atmosphere we could fly on the cylinders that are firing all right, but this atmosphere would not support us."

"Do you think it is anything serious?" asked the professor.

"I can't tell yet," was the grave reply, "that explosion sounded like a back-fire and that may be all that's the matter. In such a case we can drain the crank case and put in fresh oil; for if it was really a back-fire it was most likely caused by 'flooding.'"

Ten minutes later they landed on the firm, hard snow and lost no time in getting things in shape to spend the night where they were; for it was unlikely that repairs could be effected in time for them to fly back to the camp before dark. The canvas curtains at the sides of the aeroplane's body were drawn up, forming a snug tent. The stove was set going and soup and canned meats and vegetables warmed and eaten by the light of a lantern.

In the meantime Frank had discovered that the breakdown had been caused by a defect in the ignition apparatus which it would take some time to repair. Both he and Harry went to work on it after supper, however, and by midnight they had it adjusted.

They were just preparing to turn in, the professor and Billy having wrapped themselves in their blankets some time before, when a sudden sound, breaking on the stillness of the Antarctic night, made

them pause. Both boys strained their ears intently and the sound came once more.

This time there was no mistaking it.

It was the same sound to which Rastus had called Frank's attention the night they were on watch outside the hut.

Pulling the curtain open, the boys gazed out, determined to unravel the mystery once and for all. The night was perfectly still except for the buzzing noise, and a bright moon showed them the snow lying white and undisturbed about them.

The sound did not proceed from the ground, that was evident, but from the air. The atmosphere seemed filled with it.

"What can it be?" exclaimed Harry.

"Look—look there!" shouted Frank, at the same instant clutching his brother's arm in his excitement.

Both boys gazed upward and as they did so a dark, shadowy form passed above them far overhead. For an instant a brilliant light gleamed from it and then it vanished, going steadily eastward with the strange thrumming sound growing fainter as it receded.

The boys looked at each other in amazement and the words of Captain Hazzard flashed across Frank's mind.

"WE HAVE SOME VERY UNDESIRABLE NEIGHBORS AT CLOSE QUARTERS," the captain had said. Undoubtedly he was right.

"What did you make it out for?" asked Harry at length.

"A dirigible and no small one," was the reply, "and you?"

"Same here. You can't mistake the sound of an airship's engine. The question is what is the explanation of it all?"

"Simple."

"Simple, well I—"

"That aeroplane is the one which was bought in Europe. It is specially provided with radiators which electrically heat its gas, allowing it to navigate in these regions without fear of the gas condensing and causing the ship to descend."

"Yes, but whose is it? What are they doing in it?"

"The first question is easy to answer. That ship is the ship of the rival expedition."

"The Japanese one, you mean?"

"That's it. It must have been the light of it that I saw during the winter. I suppose they were experimenting with it then."

"Experimenting—what for?"

"For the work they are using it on to-night."

"And that is?"

"To forestall us in the discovery of the Viking ship and the South Pole."

CHAPTER XXIV.

SWALLOWED BY A CREVASSE.

The early morning following the discovery of the night trip of the dirigible saw the Golden Eagle

rising into the chill air and winging her way to the camp. The boys, as soon as they descended, hastened to Captain Hazzard's hut and detailed their adventures. As may be supposed, while both the leader of the expedition and the captain of the Southern Cross were deeply interested in the account of the flaming mountain and the prehistoric seal-like creatures, they were more deeply concerned over the boys' sighting of the airship.

"It means we have earnest rivals to deal with," was Captain Hazzard's comment, "we must set about finding the Viking ship at once. The search will not take long, for if she is not somewhere near where I have calculated she ought to be it would be waste of time to seek her at all."

Full of excitement at the prospect of embarking on the search for the ship, before long the boys dispersed for breakfast only to gather later on in Captain Hazzard's hut. The officer informed them that they were to fly to the position he indicated the next day and institute a thorough search for the lost craft. The Golden Eagle was to carry her wireless and a message was to be flashed to the camp's wireless receiving station if important discoveries were made.

In the event of treasure being found, the boys were to at once "wireless" full details and bearings of the find and a relay of men and apparatus for saving the treasure would be sent from the ship to their aid on the motor-sledge. In the event of their not discovering the Viking ship they were to spend not more than three days on the search, wirelessly the camp at the end of the third day for further instructions.

The rest of that day was spent in putting the Golden Eagle's wireless in working order and stretching the long "aerials" above her upper plane. The instruments were then tested till they were in tune for transmitting messages from a long distance. The apparatus, after a little adjustment, was found to work perfectly.

Captain Hazzard warned the boys that, in the event of the rival expedition discovering them, they were on no account to resort to violence but to "wireless" the camp at once and he would decide on the best course to pursue.

"But if they attack us?" urged Frank.

"In that case you will have to defend yourselves as effectively as possible till aid arrives," said the commander.

Early the next day, with a plentiful supply of cordite bombs and dynamite on board for blasting the Viking ship free of the ice casing which it was to be expected surrounded her, the Golden Eagle soared away from the camp.

The boys were off at last on the expedition they had longed for. The professor accompanied them with a formidable collection of nets and bottles and bags. He had had prepared a lot of other miscellaneous lumber which it had been explained to him he could not transport on an aeroplane and which he had therefore reluctantly left behind. The engine worked perfectly and Frank anticipated no further trouble from it.

As they sped along Harry from time to time tested the wireless and sent short messages back to the camp. It worked perfectly and the spark was as strong as if only a few miles separated airship and camp. Nor did there seem to be any weakening as the distance between the two grew greater.

They passed high above snow-barrens and seal-rookeries and colonies of penguins, the inhabitants of which latter cocked their heads up inquiringly at the big bird flying by far above them. Their course carried them to the eastward and as they advanced the character of the scenery changed. What were evidently bays opened up into the land and some of them seemed to run back for miles, cutting deep into the many ranges that supported the plateau of the interior on which they had found the volcano.

These bays or inlets were ice covered but it was easy to see that with the advance of summer they would be free of ice. At noon, Frank landed the aeroplane and made an observation. It showed him they were still some distance from the spot near which Captain Hazzard believed the Viking ship was imprisoned. After a hasty lunch, cooked on the stove, the aeroplane once more ascended and kept steadily on her course till nightfall.

As dark set in, the boys found themselves at a spot in which the water that lapped the foot of the great Barrier washed—or would when the ice left it—at the very bases of the mountains, which here were no more than mere hills. They were cut into in all directions by deep gulches into which during the summer it was evident the sea must penetrate.

"We are now not more than one hundred and fifty miles from the spot in which Captain Hazzard

believes the ship is ice-bound," announced Frank that night as they turned in inside the snugly curtained chassis. Sleep that night was fitful. The thought of the discovery of which they might be even then on the brink precluded all thought of sound sleep. Even the usually calm professor was excited. He hoped to find some strange creatures amid the mouldering timbers of the Viking ship if they ever found her.

Dawn found the adventurers up and busily disposing of breakfast. As soon as possible the Golden Eagle rose once more and penetrated further into the unknown on her search. Several wireless messages were sent out that day and the camp managed to "catch" every one of them. The wireless seemed to work better in that dry, cold air than in the humid atmosphere of the northern climes.

The character of the country had not changed. Deep gullies still scarred the white hills that fringed the barrier, but not one of these yielded the secret the boys had come so far to unravel.

"I'm beginning to think this is a wild goose chase," began Billy, as at noon Frank landed, took his bearings, and then announced that they were within a few minutes of the spot in which the ship ought to lie.

"She seems as elusive as the fur-bearing pollywog," announced the professor.

"You still believe there is such a creature?" asked Harry.

"Professor Tapper says so," was the reply, "I must believe it. I will search everywhere till I can find it."

"I think he was mistaken," said Billy, "I can't imagine what such a creature could look like."

"You may think he was mistaken," rejoined the professor, "but I do not. Professor Tapper is never wrong."

"But suppose you cannot find such an animal?"

"If I don't find one before we leave the South Polar regions, then, and not till then, will I believe that he was mistaken," returned the man of science with considerable dignity.

This colloquy took place while they were getting ready to reascend after a hasty lunch and was interrupted by a sudden cry from Frank, who had been gazing about while the others talked.

"What's that sticking above the snow hill yonder?" he exclaimed, pointing to a spot where a deep gully "valleyed" the hills at a spot not very far from where they stood.

"It looks like the stump of a tree," observed the professor, squinting through his spectacles.

"Or-or-the mast of a ship," quavered Harry, trembling with excitement.
"It's the Viking ship—hurray!"

"Don't go so fast," said Frank, though his voice shook, "it may be nothing but a plank set up there by some former explorer, but it certainly does look like the top of a mast."

"The best way is to go and see," suggested the professor, whose calm alone remained unruffled.

The distance between the boys and the object that had excited their attention was not considerable and the snow was smooth and unmarked by impassable gullies. The professor's suggestion was therefore at once adopted and the young adventurers were soon on their way across the white expanse which luckily was frozen hard and not difficult to traverse.

The boys all talked in excited tones as they made their way forward. If the object sticking above the gully's edge proved actually to be a mast it was in all probability a spar of the ship they sought. The thought put new life into every one and they hurried forward over the hard snow at their swiftest pace.

The professor was in the lead, talking away at a great rate, his long legs opening and shutting like scissor blades.

"Perhaps I may find a fur-bearing pollywog after all," he cried; "if you boys have found your ship surely it is reasonable to suppose that I can find my pollywog?"

"Wouldn't you rather find a Viking ship filled with gold and ivory, and frozen in the ice for hundreds of years, than an old fur-bearing pollywog?" demanded Billy.

"I would not," rejoined the professor with much dignity; "the one is only of a passing interest to

science and a curious public. The other is an achievement that will go ringing down the corridors of time making famous the name of the man who braved with his life the rigors of the South Polar regions to bring back alive a specimen of the strange creature whose existence was surmised by Professor Thomas Tapper, A.M., F.R.G.S., M.Z., and F.O.X.I.—Ow! Great Heavens!"

As the professor uttered this exclamation an amazing thing happened.

The snow seemed to open under his feet and with a cry of real terror which was echoed by the boys, who a second before had been listening with somewhat amused faces to his oratory, he vanished as utterly as if the earth had swallowed him—which it seemed it had indeed.

"The professor has fallen into a crevasse!" shouted Frank, who was the first of the group to realize what had occurred.

Billy and Harry were darting forward toward the hole in the snow through which the scientist had vanished when a sharp cry from the elder boy stopped them.

"Don't go a step further," he cried.

"Why not,—the professor is down that hole," cried Harry, "we must do something to save him."

"You can do more by keeping cool-headed than any other way," rejoined Frank. "A crevasse, into one of which the professor has fallen, is not 'a hole' as you call it, but a long rift in the earth above which snow has drifted. Sometimes they are so covered up that persons can cross in safety, at other times the snow 'bridge' gives way under their weight and they are precipitated into the crevasse itself,—an ice-walled chasm."

"Then we may never get the professor out," cried Billy in dismay. "How deep is that crevasse likely to be?"

"Perhaps only ten or twenty feet. Perhaps several hundred," was the alarming reply.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE VIKING'S SHIP.

Suddenly, from the depths as it seemed, there came a faint cry.

It was the professor's voice feebly calling for aid. Frank hastened forward but dared not venture too near the edge of the hole through which the scientist had vanished.

"Are you hurt, professor?" he cried, eagerly, and hung on the answer.

"No," came back the reply, "not much, but I can't hold on much longer."

"Are you at the bottom of the chasm?"

"No, I am clinging to a ledge. It is very slippery and if I should fall it would be to the bottom of the rift, which seems several hundred feet deep."

Even in his extreme danger the professor seemed cool and Frank took heart from him.

Luckily they had with them a coil of rope brought from the Golden Eagle for the purpose of lowering one of their number over the edge of the gulf onto the Viking ship—if the mast they had seen proved to be hers.

It was the work of a moment to form a loop in this and then Frank hailed the professor once more.

"We are going to lower a rope to you. Can you grasp it?"

"I think so. I'll try," came up the almost inaudible response.

The rope was lowered over the edge of the rift and soon to their joy the boys felt it jerked this way and that as the professor caught it.

"Tie it under your arms," enjoined Frank.

"All right," came the answer a few seconds later. "Haul away. I can't endure the cold down here much longer."

The three boys were strong and they pulled with all their might, but for a time it seemed doubtful if they could lift the professor out of the crevasse as, despite his leanness, he was a fairly heavy man. He aided them, however, by digging his heels in the wall of the crevasse as they hoisted and in ten minutes' time they were able to grasp his hands and pull him into safety.

A draught from the vacuum bottle containing hot coffee which Frank carried soon restored the professor and he was able to describe to them how, as he was walking along, declaiming concerning the fur-bearing pollywog, the ground seemed to suddenly open under his feet and he felt himself tumbling into an abyss of unknown depth.

As the chasm narrowed, he managed to jam himself partially across the rift and in this way encountered an ice-coated ledge. One glance down showed him that if he had not succeeded in doing this his plunge would have ended in death, for the crevasse seemed to exist to an unknown depth beneath the surface of the earth.

"And now that I am safe and sound," said the professor, "let us hurry on. The fall hasn't reduced my eagerness to see the wrecked Viking ship."

"But the crevasse, how are we to pass that?" asked Frank.

"We must make a detour to the south," said the professor, "I noticed when I was down there that the rift did not extend more than a few feet in that direction. In fact, had I dared to move I might have clambered out."

The boys, not without some apprehension, stepped forward in continuance of their journey, and a few minutes later, after they had made the detour suggested by the professor, realized to their joy that they had passed the dangerous abyss in safety.

"And now," shouted Frank, "forward for the Viking ship or—"

"Or a sell!" shouted the irrepressible Billy.

"Or a sell," echoed Frank.

With fast beating hearts they dashed on and a few minutes later stood on the edge of the mastmarked abyss, gazing downward into it.

As they did so a shout—such a shout as had never disturbed the great silences of that region—rent the air—

"The Viking ship at last. Hurray!"

The gully was about thirty feet deep and at the bottom of it, glazed with the thick ice that covered it, lay a queerly formed ship with a high prow,—carved like a raven's head.

IT WAS THE VIKING SHIP.

After all the centuries that had elapsed since she went adrift she was at last found, and to be ransacked of the treasure her dead sailors had amassed.

The first flush of the excitement over the discovery quickly passed and the boys grew serious. The problem of how to blast the precious derelict out of the glassy coat of ice without sinking her was a serious one. Frank, after a brief survey, concluded, however, that the ice "cradle" about her hull was sufficiently thick to hold her steady while they blasted a way from above to her decks and hold.

It was useless to linger there, as they had not brought the needful apparatus with them, so they at once started back for the Golden Eagle. Frank's first care, arrived once more at the aeroplane, was to send out the good news, and it was received with "wireless acclaim" by those at Camp Hazzard.

"Will be there in two days by motor-sledge. Commence operations at once," was the order that was flashed back after congratulations had been extended. As it was too late to do anything more that night, the boys decided to commence work on the derelict in the morning. After a hearty supper they retired to bed in the chassis of the aeroplane, all as tired out as it is possible for healthy boys to be. Nevertheless, Frank, who always—as he put it—"slept with one eye open," was awakened at about

midnight by a repetition of the noise of the mysterious airship.

There was no mistaking it. It was the same droning "burr" they had heard on the night following their discovery of the flaming mountain. Waking Harry, the two lads peered upward and saw the stars blotted out as the shadowy form of the air-ship passed above them—between the sky and themselves. All at once a bright ray of light shot downward and, after shifting about over the frozen surface for a time, it suddenly glared full on to the boys' camp.

Both lads almost uttered a cry as the bright light bathed them and made it certain that their rivals had discovered their aeroplane; but before they could utter a word the mysterious craft had extinguished the search glare and was off with the rapidity of the wind toward the west.

"They must be scared of us," said Harry at length, after a long awe-stricken silence.

"Not much, I'm afraid," rejoined Frank, with a woeful smile.

"Well, they hauled off and darted away as soon as they saw us," objected Harry.

"I'm afraid that that is no guarantee they won't come back," remarked Frank, with a serious face.

"You mean that they—"

"Have gone to get reinforcements and attack us," was the instant reply, "they must have trailed us with the powerful lenses of which the Japanese have the secret and which are used in their telescopes. They are now certain that we have found the ship and are coming back. It's simple, isn't it?"

The professor, when he and Billy awakened in the morning, fully shared the boys' apprehensions over the nocturnal visitor.

"If they think we have discovered the ship they won't rest till they have wrested it from us," he said soberly.

"I'm afraid that we are indeed in for serious trouble," said Frank, in a worried tone. "You see, Captain Hazzard and his men can't get here, even with the motor-sledge, for two days."

"Well, don't you think we had better abandon the ship and fly back to the camp?" suggested Billy.

"And leave that ship for them to rifle at their leisure—no," rejoined Frank, with lips compressed in determination, "we won't do that. We'll just go ahead and do the best we can—that's all."

"That's the way to talk," approved the professor, "now as soon as you boys have had breakfast we'll start for the ship, for, from what you have related, there is clearly no time to be lost."

The thought that their mysterious enemies might return at any time caused the boys to despatch the meal consisting of hot chocolate, canned fruit, pemmican, and salt beef, with even more haste than usual. Before they sat down to eat, however, Frank flashed a message to the camp telling them of their plight.

"Will start at once," was the reply, "keep up your courage. We are coming to the rescue."

This message cheered the boys up a good deal and they set out for the Viking ship with lighter hearts than they had had since the sighting of the night-flier. They packed with them plenty of stout rope, drills and dynamite. Harry carried the battery boxes and the rolls of wire to be used in setting off the charges when they were placed.

Arrived at the edge of the gully, a hole was drilled in the ice and an upright steel brace, one of the extra parts of the aeroplane, was imbedded in it as an upright, to which to attach the rope. It was soon adjusted and Frank, after they had drawn lots for the honor of being the first on board, climbed down it. He was quickly followed by the others, but any intention they might have had of exploring the ship at that time was precluded by the ice that coated her deck with the accumulation of centuries of drifting in the polar currents.

With the drill several holes were soon bored in the glassy coating and sticks of dynamite inserted. These were then capped with fulminate of mercury caps, and Harry climbed the rope to the surface of the narrow gully with the wires which were to carry the explosive spark. The others followed, and then, carrying the battery box to which the wires had been attached, withdrew to what was considered a safe distance.

"Ready?" asked Frank, his hand on the switch, when all had been adjusted.

"Let 'er go," cried Billy.

There was a click, and a split of blue flame followed by a roar that shook the ground under their feet. From the gully a great fountain of ice shot up mingled with smoke.

"I'm afraid I gave her too much," regretted Frank apprehensively, as the noise subsided and the smoke blew away. "I hope we haven't sunk her."

"That would be a calamity," exclaimed the professor, "but I imagine the ice beneath her was too thick to release her, even with such a heavy charge as you fired."

"Let's hope so," was the rejoinder.

Billy led the others on the rush back to the gulf.

All uttered a cry of amazement as they gazed over its edge.

The explosion had shattered the coating of ice above the vessel's decks and had also exposed her hold at a spot at which the deck itself had been blown in.

"I can't believe my eyes," shouted Billy, as he gazed.

"It's there, right enough," gasped Frank, "the old manuscript was right after all."

As for the professor and Harry, they stood speechless, literally petrified with astonishment.

Below them, exposed to view, where the deck had been torn away, was revealed the vessel's hold packed full, apparently, of yellow walrus ivory and among the tusks there glittered dully bars of what seemed solid gold.

Frank was the first down the rope. The explosion had certainly done enough damage, and if the ice "cradle" beneath the vessel's keel had not been so thick she must have been sunk with the shock of the detonation. The ice "blanket" that covered her though had been shattered like a pane of glass—and, with picks thrown down onto the decks from above the boys soon cleared a path to the door of a sort of raised cabin aft.

Then they paused.

A nameless dread was on them of disturbing the secrets of the long dead Vikings. Before them was the cabin door which they longed to open but somehow none of them seemed to have the courage to do so. The portal was of massive oak but had been sprung by the explosion till it hung on its hinges weakly. One good push would have shoved it down.

"Say, Billy, come and open this door," cried Harry, but Billy was intently gazing into the hold, now and then jumping down into it and handling the ivory and bar gold with an awe-stricken face.

"Well, are you boys going to open that door?" asked the professor at last. He had been busy in another part of the ship examining the rotten wood to see if he could find any sort of insects in it.

"Well—er, you see, professor—" stammered Harry.

"What—you are scared," exclaimed the professor, laughing.

"No; not exactly scared, but—," quavered Frank, "it doesn't seem just right to invade that place. It's like breaking open a tomb."

"Nonsense," exclaimed the scientist, who had no more sentiment about him than a steel hack-saw, "watch me."

He bounded forward and put his shoulder to the mouldering door. It fell inward with a dull crash and as it did so the professor leaped backward with a startled cry, stumbling over a deck beam and sprawling in a heap.

"W-w-what's the matter?" gasped Harry, with a queer feeling at the back of his scalp and down his spine.

"T-T-THERE'S SOMEONE IN THERE!" was the startling reply from the recumbent scientist.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CAUGHT IN A TRAP.

"Someone in there?" Frank echoed the exclamation in amazed tones.

"Y-y-yes," stammered the scared professor, "he's sitting at a table."

"It must be one of the long dead Vikings," said Frank, after a moment's thought, "in these frozen regions and incased in ice as the ship has been, I suppose that a human body could be kept in perfect preservation indefinitely."

"I reckon that's it," exclaimed the professor, much relieved at this explanation, "but, boys, it gave me a dreadful start. He was looking right at me and I thought I saw his head move. Perhaps it was Olaf himself."

"Nonsense," said Frank sharply, who, now that the door was actually open, had lost his queer feeling of scare; "come on, let's explore the cabin. That poor dead Viking can't hurt us."

Followed by the others he entered the dark, mouldy cabin and could himself hardly repress a start as he found himself facing a man who must have been of gigantic stature. The dead sea rover was seated at a rough oak table with his head resting on his hand as if in deep thought. He had a mighty yellow beard reaching almost to his waist and wore a loose garment of some rough material. Had it not been for a green-mold on his features he must have seemed a living man.

The cabin contained some rude couches and rough bunks of dark wood lined its sides, but otherwise, with the exception of the table and chairs, it was bare of furniture. Some curious looking weapons, including several shields and battle axes, were littered about the place and some quaint instruments of navigation which Frank guessed were crude foreshadows of the sextant and the patent log, lay on a shelf.

"How do you suppose he died?" asked Billy in an awed whisper, indicating the dead man.

"I don't know—frozen to death perhaps," was Frank's reply.

"But where are the others? The crew,—his companions?"

"Perhaps they rowed away; perhaps they went out to seek for food and never came back—we can't tell and never shall be able to," was the rejoinder.

The bare, dark cabin was soon explored and the boys, marveling a good deal at the temerity of the old-time sailors who made their way across unknown seas in such frail ships, emerged into the air once more. They determined to throw off in work the gloomy feelings that had oppressed them in the moldering cabin of the Viking ship.

"The first thing to do," announced Frank, "is to get all we can of this stuff to the surface." He indicated the hold.

With this end in view a block and tackle was rigged on the surface of the plateau, and the ivory and gold hauled out as fast as the boys could load it. The professor at the top attended to the hauling and dumping of each load. Soon a good pile of the valuable stuff lay beside him and he hailed the boys and suggested that it was time for a rest.

Nothing loath to knock off their fatiguing task for a while, the boys clambered up to the surface by the rope and soon were busy eating the lunch they had brought with them. They washed it down with smoking hot chocolate which they had poured into their vacuum bottles at breakfast time. The hot stuff was grateful and invigorating in the chill air, and they ate and drank with keen appetites.

So excited were they by the events of the morning, and so much was there to talk about, that the big dirigible had entirely slipped from their minds till they suddenly were jolted into abrupt recollection by a happening that brought them all to their feet with a shout of alarm.

FROM HIGH IN THE AIR A VOICE HAD HAILED THEM.

They looked up with startled eyes to see hovering directly over them the mysterious dirigible.

Her deck seemed to be supporting several men, some of whom gazed curiously at the boys; but what

caught the adventurers' attention, and riveted it, was the sight of several rifles aimed at them.

"Keep still, and we will not shoot," shouted a man who appeared to be in command, "we do not wish to harm you."

"Hum," said Billy, "I don't see what they want to aim those shooting irons at us for, then."

"It would be useless to try to run, I suppose," said the professor.

"It would be dangerous to try it," decided Frank, "those fellows evidently mean to kill us if we try to disobey their orders."

As he spoke the dirigible was brought to the ground by her operators and as she touched the snow several of her crew gave a shout of surprise at the sight of the pile of treasure already excavated by the boys. They started to run toward it; but were checked by a sharp cry from their officer. They obeyed him instantly and marshaled in a motionless line waiting his next command, but he left them and strode through the snow toward the boys.

He was a dapper little brown man, dressed in the uniform of the Mikado's Manchurian troops. A heavy, fur collar encircled his neck and a fur cap was pulled over his ears.

"Don't make any hostile move or it will mean your death," he warned as he advanced toward them.

The boys stood motionless, but the professor, in a high, angry voice, broke out:

"What do you mean, sir, by approaching American citizens in this manner? If it is the Viking ship you are after we have already claimed it in the name of the United States."

"That matters little here,—where we are," said the little officer, with a smile, "we are now in a country where might is right; and I think you will acknowledge that we have the might on our side."

The boys gazed at the twelve men who stood facing them with leveled rifles and could not help but acknowledge the truth of these words. It seemed that they were utterly in the power of the Japanese.

"Your government shall hear about this," sputtered the professor angrily. "It will not countenance such a high-handed proceeding. We are not at war with your country. You have no right under the law of nations, or any other law, to interfere with us."

"You will oblige me by stepping into the cabin of my dirigible," was the response in an even tone. The others had paid not the slightest attention to the professor's harangue.

"And if we refuse?" demanded the professor.

"If you refuse you will be shot, and do not, I beg, make the mistake of thinking that I don't mean what I say."

There was nothing to do, under the circumstances, but to obey and, with sinking hearts, they advanced in the direction of the big air-ship. With great courtesy the interloper ushered them inside.

They found a warm and comfortable interior, well cushioned and even luxurious in its appointments. Once they were well inside the little man, with a bow, remarked:

"I now beg to be excused. You will find books and the professor something to smoke if he wishes it. Don't make any attempt to escape as I should regret to be compelled to have any of you shot."

He was gone. Closing the door behind him with a "click," that told the boys that they were locked in.

"Prisoners," exclaimed Billy.

"That's it, and just as we have accomplished our wish," said Frank bitterly; "it's too bad."

"Well, it can't be helped," said the professor, "let's look about and see if there is not some way we can get out if an opportunity presents itself."

They approached a window and through it could see the new arrivals examining the edge of the gulf and peeping down at the Viking ship. But as soon as they opened the casement and peered out a man with a rifle appeared, as if from out of the earth, and sharply told them to get inside.

"Well, we've got to spend the time somehow, we might as well examine the ship," said the professor closing the window.

Somewhat cheered by his philosophical manner, the boys followed him as he led the way from the main cabin through a steel door which they found led into the engine-room. The engines were cut off, but a small motor was operating a dynamo with a familiar buzzing sound. This was the sound the boys had heard when the ship passed above them at night.

"What have they got the dynamo going for?" demanded Harry.

"I don't know. To warm the ship by electric current, or something I suppose," said Frank listlessly. "I wonder where the engineer is? The ship seems deserted."

"I guess he's out with the rest looking over OUR treasure," said the professor bitterly.

"Ours no longer,—might is right, you know," quoted Harry miserably.

Frank had been examining the machinery with some care. Even as a prisoner he felt some interest in the completeness of the engine room of the Japanese dirigible. He bent over her twin fifty-horse-power motors with admiring appreciation and examined the other machinery with intense interest.

The purring dynamo next came in for his attention and he was puzzling over the utility of several wires that led from it through the engine room roof when a sudden thought flashed into his mind. With a cry of triumph he bent over a small lever marked "accelerator," beside which was a small gauge. He rapidly adjusted the gauge, so that it would not register any more than the pressure it recorded at that moment and then shoved the lever over to its furthest extent.

"Whatever are you doing?" demanded Harry, much mystified at these actions, at the conclusion of which he had strolled up.

"You know that the gas in the bag of this dirigible is heated by electric radiators in order to avoid condensation of the gas?" was the seemingly incoherent reply.

"Yes," was the astonished answer, "but what has that—?"

"Hold on a minute," cried Frank, raising his hand, "and that gas when expanded by heat soon becomes too buoyant for its container, and will, if allowed to continue expanding, burst its confines."

Harry nodded his head.

"Well, then," Frank went on, "that's what's going to happen on this ship."

"Whatever do you mean? I suppose I'm dense, but I don't see yet."

"I mean," said Frank, "that I've fixed the gas-heating radiators so that in a few hours the bag above our head will be ripped into tatters by a gas explosion. The resistance coils are now heating and expanding the gas at a rate of ten times above the normal and the gauge I have adjusted so that an inspection of it will show nothing to be the matter."

"But what good will that do us?" urged Harry.

"It may save our lives. In any event the Viking treasure will never be taken from here by another nation."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE FATE OF THE DIRIGIBLE.

"Have you any idea what time the explosion will take place?" asked Harry, anxiously, almost dumbfounded by the other's cool manner.

"Soon after dark has fallen. Don't be scared, it won't hurt us; at least I think not, but in the confusion that is certain to follow we must make a dash for the Golden Eagle."

"It's a desperate chance."

"We are in a desperate fix," was the brief reply.

An hour later something occurred which caused Frank, who had in the meantime communicated his plan to the others, considerable anxiety. The despoilers of the adventurers' treasure hoard returned to the ship laden down with bar gold and ivory and, from what the captain was saying to his minor officers, it seemed, though he spoke in a low tone, that it was planned to sail right off back to the camp of the men the boys had now come justifiably to regard as their enemies.

"If they do that, we are lost," said Frank, after he had whispered his fears to Harry.

"You mean they will discover the trick we have played on them?"

"No, I mean that the explosion will come off in midair and we shall all be dashed to death together."

"Phew!—Would it not be better to tell them what we have done and take our chances?"

"If the worst comes to the worst I shall do that. It would be imperiling our lives uselessly to go aloft with the overheated gas that is now in the bag."

But the "worst did not come to the worst." The little captain who had paid small or no attention to his prisoners, evidently realizing that they could not get away, didn't like the look of the weather, it seemed, and made frequent consultations of the barometer with his fellows. The glass was falling fast and there was evidently a blizzard or sharp storm of some kind approaching.

At this time a fresh fear crossed Frank's mind. What if the Japs had destroyed the Golden Eagle? So far as he could judge they had not molested her, evidently not thinking it worth while to waste time they judged better spent on looting the Viking ship of its treasure. But if they had disabled her, the boy knew that in the event of his companions escaping they faced an alternative between death by freezing and starvation, or being shot down by the rifles of their captors. However, Frank resolved to put such gloomy speculations out of his mind. It was useless to worry. Things, if they were as he half feared, would not mend for thinking about them.

Supper, a well-cooked, well-served meal, was eaten under this painful strain. The boys and the professor put the best countenance they could on things, considering that their minds were riveted on the great gasbag above them which even now, as they knew, was swollen almost to bursting point with its superheated gases.

"It is too bad that the weather threatens so," remarked their captor, who was politeness itself, to his prisoners; "otherwise we should now be in the air on our way back to my camp. In three more trips we shall be able, however, to carry off the rest of the treasure. We were well repaid for keeping our eyes on you."

The boys answered something, they hardly knew what. Frank in his nervousness looked at his watch. The strain was becoming painful. At last, to their intense relief, they rose from supper and the little officer shut himself in his own cabin. Outside, the boys could hear the feet of the two armed sentries crunching on the snow.

"The outrush of gas will stupefy them," whispered Frank, "we shall have nothing to fear from them after the explosion takes place."

"When is it due?" gasped Billy, with a ghastly attempt at a smile.

"At any moment now. It is impossible to calculate the exact time. But within half an hour we should know our fate."

Silently the boys and the professor waited, although the scientist was so nervous that he strode up and down the cabin floor.

Suddenly the silence was shattered by a loud shout from the engine room.

"The gas! The gas! We are—"

The sentence was never finished.

There was a sudden convulsion of the entire fabric of the big dirigible—as if a giant hand from without were shaking her like a puppy shakes a rat.

She seemed to lift from the ground in a convulsive leap and settled back with a crash that smashed every pane of glass and split her stout sides.

At the same instant, there was an ear-splitting roar as if a boiler had exploded and a flash of ruddy flame.

The exploding gas had caught fire—possibly from a spark from the electric radiators as the bag and their supporting framework was ripped apart by the explosion.

Dazed and half stunned, the boys groped about in total darkness; for the explosion had extinguished every light on the ship.

"Boys, where are you?"

It was Frank calling.

"Great heavens, what a sensation!" gasped the professor, half choked by the powerful fumes of the hydrogen gas which filled the air.

Rapidly the others answered to Frank and groped through the darkness toward his voice. Before them was the shattered side of the cabin. Through the gap was the sky. They could see the bright antarctic stars gleaming. Beyond the rent they knew lay freedom, provided the marauders had not molested their aeroplane.

It was the work of a second to stagger through the opening made by the explosion and gain the fresh air, which they inhaled in great mouthfuls. Then began the dash for the aeroplane.

In the wild confusion that reigned following the explosion, their absence, so far as they could perceive, had not been noticed. As Frank had guessed, the two sentries were knocked senseless by the explosion and the fugitives stumbled over their unconscious figures recumbent on the snow.

Gasping and staggering they plunged on in the direction they knew the Golden Eagle lay. It was not more than a mile distant, but before they reached their goal the professor gave out and the boys had to half-drag, half-carry him over the frozen surface. They were bitterly cold, too, and the thought of the blankets and warm clothing aboard the Golden Eagle lent them additional strength—as much so, in fact, as the peril that lay behind them.

"Can you see her?" gasped Harry, after about fifteen minutes of this heart-breaking work.

"Yes. I think so at least. There seems to be a dark object on the snow ahead. If only they have not molested her," panted Frank.

"If they have, it's all up," exclaimed Billy Barnes. At the same moment Harry breathed:

"Hark!"

Borne over the frozen ground they could hear shouts.

"They have discovered our escape!" exclaimed Frank, "it's a race for life now."

[Illustration: "It's a Race for Life Now."]

His words threw fresh determination into all. Even the professor made a desperate struggle. A few more paces and there was no doubt that the dark object ahead was the Golden Eagle. Only one anxiety now remained. Was she unharmed?

Bang!

It was a shot from the men of the dirigible.

"They are firing after us," exclaimed Billy.

"They can fire all they want to if they come as wide of the mark as that," said Frank; "they are shooting at random to scare us."

A few seconds later they gained the side of the Golden Eagle and, worn and harried as they were, they could not forbear setting up a cheer as they found that the aeroplane was in perfect shape.

Hastily they cranked the Golden Eagle motor up, blue flame and sharp reports bursting from her exhausts as they did so. The engine was working perfectly,—every cylinder taking up its work as the sparks began to occur rhythmically.

"We've put the fat in the fire now," exclaimed Frank, as he took his seat at the steering wheel. "If they could not locate us before, the noise of the exhaust and the blue flame will betray us to them."

"Well, it can't be helped," shouted Harry, above the roar of the engine. "We've got to get every ounce of power out of her to-night."

The other lad nodded and as he did so a sound like a bee in flight fell on the adventurers' ears—a bullet.

It was followed by several reports.

"They've got the range," cried Harry.

"They won't have it long," said his brother as he threw in the clutch and rapidly the Golden Eagle sped forward, crashing faster and faster over the frozen surface as her young driver worked the engine up to full speed.

In a few seconds more they felt the aeroplane begin to lift and soar into the night air.

They were exploding skyward to safety, while far below them their baffled captors were firing aimlessly in the hope of a random shot shattering some vital part of the aeroplane.

But no such thing happened and as the boys sped toward the west, bound for Camp Hazzard, they sent out a wireless message. Again and again they tried but without success. They could not raise an answer.

"Of course we can't raise them. They are on the march!" shouted Frank suddenly.

"On the motor-sledge bound for the Viking ship," cried Billy, "they should be there to-morrow."

"Say, fellows, we have done it now," cried Frank, with a sudden twinge.

"What's the matter?" inquired the professor.

"Why, they will arrive there to find the others in possession and no sign of us. They'll think we ran away without even putting up a fight."

"We'll have to try to pick them up in the daylight," was the reply; "we know about the route along which they'll drive and from this altitude we can't miss them if they are anywhere within miles of us."

The boys were then at a height of about 1,500 feet. The air was bitter chill and warm wraps and furs had been donned long before. Suddenly the aeroplane gave a sickening sidewise dip and seemed about to capsize. Frank caught and righted her just in time. The gyroscopic balance whizzed furiously.

A curious moaning sound became perceptible in the rigging and a wind, which they had not noticed before, lashed their faces with a stinging sensation. The recollection of the falling barometer flashed across Frank's mind. They were in for a storm.

The boy gazed at the compass beneath its binnacle light. As he did so he gave a gasp.

"We are way off our course," he cried, "the wind is out of the north and it is blowing us due south."

"Due south!" exclaimed Harry.

"That's it. And the worst of it is I can do nothing. With this load on board I don't dare try to buck the wind and it's freshening every minute."

"But if we are being blown due south from here, where on earth will we fetch up?" cried Billy, in dismayed tones.

They all looked blank as they awaited the reply. Frank glanced at his watch and then at the compass and made a rapid mental calculation.

"At the rate we are going we should be over the South Pole, roughly speaking, at about midnight," he said.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE HEART OF THE ANTARCTIC.

The professor was the first to break the tense silence that followed

Frank's words.

"Into the heart of the Antarctic," he breathed.

There seemed to be something in the words that threw a spell of awed silence over them all. Little was said as on and on through the polar night the aeroplane drove,—the great wind of the roof of the world harassing her savagely, viciously,—as if it resented her intrusion into the long hidden arcana of the polar Plateau.

It grew so bitter cold that the chill ate even through their furs and air-proofed clothing. The canvas curtains were hoisted for a short distance to keep off the freezing gale. They dared not set them fully for fear they might act as sails and drive the ship before the gale so fast that all control would be lost.

At ten o'clock Frank, his hands frozen almost rigid, surrendered the wheel to Harry.

It now began to snow. Not a heavy snowfall but a sort of frozen flurry more like hail in its texture. Frank glanced at his watch.

Eleven o'clock.

"How's she headed?" shouted Harry, above the song of the polar gale.

"Due south," was the short reply as the other boy bent over the compass.

"Well, wherever we are going, we are bound for the pole, there's some grim satisfaction in that," remarked Frank.

On and on through the cold they drove. The snow had stopped now and suddenly Billy called attention to a strange phenomenon in the southern sky.

It became lit with prismatic colors like a huge curtain, gorgeously illuminated in its ample folds by the rays of myriad colored searchlights.

"Whatever is it?" gasped Billy in an awed tone as the mystic lights glowed and danced in almost blinding radiance and cast strange colored lights about the laboring aeroplane.

"The Aurora Australis," said the professor in an almost equally subdued voice, "the most beautiful of all the polar sky displays."

"The Aurora Australis," cried Frank, "then we are near the pole indeed."

Half past eleven.

The lights in the sky began to dim and soon the aeroplane was driving on through solid blackness. The suspense was cruel. Not one of the adventurers had any idea of the conditions they were going to meet. A nameless dread oppressed all.

Suddenly Frank, after a prolonged scrutiny of the compass, voiced what was becoming a general fear.

"What if we are being drawn by magnetic force toward the pole?"

"And be dashed to destruction as we reach it?" the professor finished for him.

Brave as they were, the adventurers gave a shudder that was not born of the gnawing cold as the possibility occurred to them. Frank glanced at the barograph. Fifteen hundred feet. They were then holding their own in altitude. This was a cheering sign.

Ten minutes to twelve.

The strange lights began to reappear. Glowing in fantastic forms they seemed alive with lambent fire. As the boys gazed at each other they could see that their features were tinted with the weird fires of the polar sky.

Twelve o'clock.

Frank gave a hurried dash toward the compass and drew back with a shout.

"Look," he shouted, "we are within the polar influence."

The needle of the instrument was spinning round and round at an almost perpendicular angle in the binnacle with tremendous velocity. The pointer tore round its points like the hands of a crazy clock.

"What does it mean?" quavered Harry.

"The South Pole, or as near to it as we are ever likely to get," exclaimed Frank, peering over the side.

Far below illuminated fantastically by the lights of the dancing, flickering aurora he could see a vast level plain of snow stretching, so it seemed, to infinity. There was no open sea. No strange land. Nothing but a vast plateau of silent snow.

"Fire your revolvers, boys," shouted Frank, as, suiting the action to the word, he drew from his holster his magazine weapon and saluted the silent skies.

"The South Pole—Hurrah!"

It was a quavering cry, but the first human sound that had ever broken the peace of the mysterious solitudes above which they were winging.

Suddenly in the midst of the "celebration" the aeroplane was violently twisted about. Every bolt and stay in her creaked and strained under the stress, but so well and truly had she been built that nothing started despite Frank's fears that the voyage to the pole was to end right there in disaster.

The adventurers were thrown about violently. All, that is, but Frank, who had now resumed the wheel and steadied himself with it. As they scrambled to their feet Billy chattered:

"Whatever happened—did a cyclone strike us?"

For answer Frank bent over the compass and gave a puzzled cry.

"I don't understand this," he exclaimed.

"Don't understand what?" asked Harry, coming to his side.

"Why look here—what do you make of that?"

"The needle has steadied and is pointing north!" cried Harry, as he gazed at the compass.

"North," echoed the professor.

"There's no question about it," rejoined Frank, knitting his brows.

"What is your explanation of this sudden reversal of the wind?" asked the professor.

"I know no more than you," replied the puzzled young aviator, "the only reason I can advance is that at the polar cap some strange influences rule the wind currents and that we are caught in a polar eddy, as it were."

"If it holds we are saved," cried the professor, who had begun to fear that they might never be able to emerge from their newly discovered region.

Hold it did and daybreak found the aeroplane above the same illimitable expanse of snow that marked the pole, but several miles to the north.

"I'm going down to take an observation," said Frank, suddenly, "and also, has it occurred to you fellows that we haven't eaten a bite since last night?"

"Jiminy crickets," exclaimed Billy Barnes, his natural flow of spirits now restored, "that's so. I'm hungry enough to eat even a fur-bearing pollywog, if there's one around here."

"Boys," began the professor solemnly as Billy concluded, "I have a confession to make."

"A confession?" cried Harry, "what about?"

"Why for some time I have entertained a doubt in my mind and that doubt has now crystallized to a certainty. I don't believe there is such a creature as the fur-bearing pollywog."

"Then Professor Tapper is wrong?" asked Harry, amazed at the scientist's tone.

"I am convinced he is. I shall expose him when we return—if we ever do," declared the scientist.

A few minutes later they landed on the firm snow and soon a hearty meal of hot canned mutton, vegetables, soup, and even a can of plum pudding, warmed on their stove and washed down with boiling tea, was being disposed of.

"And now," said Frank, as he absorbed the last morsels on his plate, "let's see whereabouts on the ridgepole of the earth we have lighted."

The boy's observation showed that they were at a point some two hundred miles to the southwest of the spot in which they had left the crippled dirigible and the Viking ship. The wind had dropped, however, and conditions were favorable for making a fast flight to the place they were now all impatient to reach Frank, after a few minutes' figuring, announced that dusk ought to find them at the Viking ship and, if all went well, in communication with their friends.

No time was lost in replenishing the gasoline tank from the reserve "drums," and carefully inspecting the engine and then a long farewell was bade to the Polar plateau. Without a stop the Golden Eagle winged steadily toward the northeast, and as the wonderful polar sunset was beginning to paint the western sky they made out the black form of the disabled dirigible on the snow barrens not far from the Viking ship's gully.

As they gazed they broke into a cheer, for advancing toward the other dark object at a rapid rate was another blot on the white expanse, which a moment's scrutiny through the glasses showed them was the motor-sledge packed with men on whose rifles the setting sun glinted brightly. The Golden Eagle ten minutes later swooped to earth at a spot not twenty yards from her original landing place and a few moments later the boys were shaking hands and executing a sort of war dance about Captain Barrington and Captain Hazzard, while Ben Stubbs was imploring some one to "shiver his timbers" or "carry away his top-sails" or "keel-haul him" or something to relieve his feelings.

Eagerly the officers pressed for details of the polar discovery, but Frank, after a rapid sketching of conditions as they had observed them at the world's southern axis, went on to describe the events that had led up to their wild flight and urged immediate negotiations with the rival explorers. Both leaders agreed to advance at once, convinced that their force was sufficiently formidable to overcome the Japs.

"Steady, men, and be ready for trouble but make no hostile move till you get the word," warned Captain Hazzard, as the somewhat formidable looking party advanced on the stricken dirigible. At first no sign of life was visible about her, but as they neared the ship Frank saw that the wrecked cabin had been patched up with canvas, and parts of the balloon bag that had not burned, till it formed a fairly snug tent. They were within a hundred paces of it before anyone appeared to have taken any notice of their arrival and then the little officer, who had directed the capture of the adventurers, appeared.

As Billy said afterward, he "never turned a hair," over the conditions that confronted him. He was a beaten man and knew it; but his manner was perfectly suave and calm.

"Good evening, gentlemen," was all he said, with a wave of his hand toward the Viking ship and the pile of ivory and gold that still lay on the edge of the gully, "to the victors belong the spoils and you are without doubt the victors."

He gazed at the array of armed men that backed up the two officers and the boys.

"We have come to take formal possession in the name of the United States, of the remains of the Viking ship," said Captain Hazzard, somewhat coldly, for, after what he had heard from the boys, he felt in no way amiably disposed toward the smiling, suave, little man.

"If you have pen and ink and paper in your cabin we will draw up a formal agreement which will hold good in an international court," supplemented Captain Barrington.

A flash of resentment passed across the other's face but it was gone in an instant.

"Certainly, sir, if you wish it," he said, "but, if it had not been for those boys we should by this time have been far away."

"I do not doubt it," said Captain Barrington, dryly, "and, now, if you please, we will draw up and sign the paper."

Ten minutes later, with the boys' signatures on it as witnesses, the important document was drawn up and sealed with a bit of wax that Captain Hazzard had in his pocket writing-set. And so ended the episode of the attempt to seize the treasure of the Viking ship.

Now only remains to be told the manner of its transporting to the Southern Cross and the last preparations before bidding farewell to the inhospitable land in which they had spent so much time. First, however, the castaways of the dirigible were given transportation on the motor-sledge to their ship which, to the astonishment of all the American party, they found was snugly quartered in a deep gulf, not more than twenty miles to the westward of the berth of the Southern Cross. This accounted for

the light and the buzzing of the air-ship being heard so plainly by the Southern Crucians. The defeated Japs sailed at once for the north, departing as silently as they had arrived.

It took many trips of the motor-sledge before the last load of the Viking ship's strange cargo was snugly stored in the hold of the Southern Cross. At Captain Hazzard's command the dead Viking was buried with military honors and his tomb still stands in the "White silence." Then came the dismantling of the Golden Eagle and the packing of the aeroplane in its big boxes.

"Like putting it in a coffin," grunted Billy, as he watched the last cover being screwed on.

All the time this work was going forward the nights and days were disturbed with mighty reports like those of a heavy gun.

The ice was breaking up.

The frozen sea was beginning to be instinct with life. The time for the release of the Southern Cross was close at hand.

At last the tedious period of waiting passed and one night with a mighty crash the ice "cradle" in which the Southern Cross rested parted from the ice-field and the ship floated free. The engineers' force had been busy for a week and in the engine-room all was ready for the start north, but another tedious wait occurred while they waited for the field-ice to commence its weary annual drift.

At last, one morning in early December, Captain Barrington and Captain Hazzard gave the magic order:

"Weigh anchor!"

"Homeward bound!" shouted Ben Stubbs, racing forward like a boy.

A week later, as the Southern Cross was ploughing steadily northward, a dark cloud of smoke appeared on the horizon. It was not made out positively for the relief ship Brutus till an hour had passed and then the rapid-fire gun crackled and the remainder of the daylight rockets were shot off in joyous celebration.

In the midst of the uproar Billy Barnes appeared with a broom.

"Whatever are you going to do with that?" demanded Captain Hazzard, with a smile, as the lad, his eyes shining with eagerness, approached.

"Please, Captain Hazzard, have it run up to the main-mast head," beseeched Billy.

"Have halliards reeved and run it up, Hazzard," said Captain Barrington, who came up at this moment, "the lads have certainly made a clean sweep."

So it came about that a strange emblem that much puzzled the captain of the Brutus was run up to the main-mast head as the two ships drew together.

"That's the Boy Aviators' standard," said Billy, proudly surveying it.
"We win."

Shortly afterward a boat from the Brutus came alongside with the mail. "Letters from home," what magic there is in these words to adventurers who have long sojourned in the solitary places of the earth! Eagerly the boys seized theirs and bore them off to quiet corners of the deck.

"Hurrah," cried Billy, after he had skimmed through his epistles. "I'm commissioned to write up the trip for two newspapers and a magazine. How's your news, boys, good?"

The boys looked up from their pile of correspondence.

"I'm afraid we're going to have a regular reception when we get home," said Frank rather apprehensively.

"Hurray! Brass-bands—speeches—red-fire and big-talk," cried Billy.

"None of that for us," said Harry, "I guess we'll retire to the country for a while, till it blows over."

But they did not escape, for on the arrival of the Polar ships in New York the boys and the commanders of the expedition were seized on and lionized till newer idols caught the popular taste. Then, and not till then, were they allowed to settle down in peace and quiet to tabulate the important scientific results of the expedition.

As for the Professor, what he wrote about Professor Tapper—a screed by the way that nearly caused a mortal combat between the two savants—may be read in his massive volume entitled "The Confutation of the Tapper Theory of a South Polar Fur-Bearing Pollywog, by Professor Simeon Sandburr." It weighs twelve pounds, and can be found in any large library.

CONCLUSION.

And here, although the author would dearly like to detail their further adventures, we must bid the Boy Aviators "Farewell." Those who have followed this series know, however, that the lads were not likely to remain long inactive without seeking further aerial adventures. Whether the tale of these will ever be set down cannot at this time be forecast. The Chester boys adventures have been recorded, not as the deeds of paragons or phenomenons, but as examples of what pluck, energy, and a mixture of brains, can accomplish,—and with this valedictory we will once more bid "God speed" to "The Boy Aviators."

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BOY AVIATORS' POLAR DASH; OR, FACING DEATH IN THE ANTARCTIC ***

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