Webster Frank V.

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CHAPTER I
NAT SAVES A BOAT

"There's a rowboat adrift!" exclaimed one of a group of men who stood on the edge of a large pier at Chicago's water front.

"Yes, and the steamer will sure smash it," added another. "She's headed right for it! It's a wonder folks wouldn't learn to tie their boats secure. Whose is it?"

"I don't know. It's a good boat, though. Pity to see it knocked into kindling wood."

"That's right."

The pilot of the big freight steamer, which was approaching her dock after a voyage down Lake Michigan, also saw the drifting boat now, and, doubtless thinking some one was in it, he pulled the whistle wire sharply. A hoarse blast from the steamer's siren came across the water. The signal was one of alarm.

At the sound of it a boy, who had been sitting on a box at the edge of the wharf, idly swinging his bare feet to and fro, looked up. He was a lad about fifteen years old, with brown eyes and a pleasant face. Though clean, his clothes – what few he had on – were very much patched.

"Something's the matter," said the lad. "Something in the path of the steamer, I guess," for he had been around the lake front so constantly that he was a regular water-rat, and he knew what every whistle signal meant.

As the boy glanced out to where the steamer was he saw the rowboat, almost in the path of the big vessel, for the pilot of the freighter had shifted his wheel to avoid a collision, though changing his course meant that he could not make as good a landing as he had expected.

"Why, that rowboat's going to be smashed!" the boy exclaimed, repeating the general opinion of the crowd. "The steamer can't get up to the bulkhead without grinding it to pieces. There! He's reversing!"

As he spoke there came across the narrow expanse of water the sound of bells from the engine-room – bells that indicated, to the practiced ear of the lad, the signal for the engineer to back the freight steamer.

"That boat's worth saving," the boy murmured as he jumped off the box and went closer to the end of the pier. "I'm going to do it, too. Maybe I'll get a reward."

He lost no time in useless thinking, but, throwing off his coat with one motion and divesting himself of his trousers by another, he poised himself for an instant on the stringpiece of the pier, clad in his undergarments.

"Here! What you going to do?" yelled a special officer who was detailed on the pier. "Nobody allowed to commit suicide here!"

"Who's going to commit suicide?" demanded the boy. "I'm going after that rowboat."

"The steamer'll run you down!"

"Not much! Didn't you hear the reverse signal?"

The officer had, but he did not know as much about boats and their signals as did Nat Morton, which was the name of the lad about to leap into the lake.

In fact, the big steamer, which had slackened speed on approaching the pier, was now slowly backing away. The action of the wind, however, and the waves created by the propeller, operated to send the rowboat nearer to the large vessel.

With a splash Nat Morton dived into the lake, cleaving the water cleanly. When he shot up to the surface a few seconds later he was considerably nearer the boat, for he had swum under water as far as he could, as it was easier and he could go faster. Few tricks in the swimming or diving line were unknown to Nat Morton.

"That's a plucky lad," observed one man to another.

"Indeed he is," was the reply. "Who is he?"

"I don't know much about him, except I see him along the lake and river front every time a steamer comes in. What he doesn't know about boats and the docks isn't worth knowing. They say he can tell almost any of the regular steamers just by their whistles, before they can be seen in a fog."

"Well, he's a good diver, anyhow. Guess he'll save that boat, all right. It's a nervy thing to do. He ought to get a reward."

"So he had, but I don't suppose he will. Probably some sailor tied his boat up while he went ashore, and the knot slipped. He'll never give the boy anything."

"Look! He's almost at her now."

"So he is. Say, but he's a swift swimmer. I never saw any one who could beat him."

"Me either. There! He's in the boat and he's rowing her out of the way."

"That's right, and the crowd on the steamer is cheering him. Guess that pilot's mad enough to chew nails. It'll take him ten minutes longer to dock now, on account of that rowboat getting in his way."

"Lots of pilots would have run right in, and not cared whether they smashed the boat or not," said a third man, joining in the conversation.

"So they would, but John Weatherby isn't that kind. He's one of the best and most careful pilots on the lake, but he's getting old. Perhaps that's what makes him so careful."

"Maybe; but now the steamer's coming in. The boy has the boat out of the way. I've got to get my team. I'm expecting a big load this trip."

"So am I," added the other two men, who were teamsters and freight handlers. They separated to get ready for the unloading of the cargo, which would soon follow the docking of the steamer, that was now proceeding again after the delay caused by the drifting boat.

In the meanwhile, Nat Morton had climbed into the small craft, and finding a pair of oars under the seats, was propelling it toward a float from which it had drifted. He had paid little attention to the cheers of the crew of the freighter, who in this way showed their appreciation of what he had done. Nat was anxious to find the owner of the boat, for he had in mind a possible reward.

As he reached the float he saw a young man hurrying down the inclined gangplank that led to the top of the bulkhead. The youth seemed excited.

"Here! What are you doing in my boat?" he cried. "Get out of it right away! I thought some of you dock-rats would try to steal it if I left it alone an hour or so."

"Oh, you did, eh?" asked Nat as he stepped out on the float. "Well, you're mistaken. Next time you want to learn how to tie a knot that won't slip when you leave your boat, if you don't want it knocked into kindling wood by a steamer."

"Tie a knot! Smash the boat! Why – why – you're all wet!" exclaimed the other.

"Shouldn't wonder," observed the boy calmly. "The Chicago River isn't exactly dry at this time of the year."

He finished tying the boat, making a regular sailor's knot, and then started up the gangplank. Clearly he might expect no reward from this man.

"Hold on a minute," said the owner of the boat.

"I'm in a hurry," replied Nat, "I want to get my clothes. They're up on the pier, and somebody might take a notion to walk off with 'em. Not that they're worth an awful lot, but they're all I have. Guess you'll have to excuse me."

"Going for your clothes? I don't exactly understand."

"He jumped off the dock and got your boat, which went adrift right in the course of that steamer," explained a 'longshoreman who had listened to the conversation and who had seen what Nat did. "Plucky thing it was, too. If it hadn't been for him you wouldn't have any boat now."

"Is that so? I didn't understand. I thought he was trying to steal my boat."

"Steal your boat? Say, you don't belong around here, do you?"

"No. My father is the owner of a small steam yacht, and I am taking a trip with him. This is the first time I was ever in Chicago. The yacht is tied out there, beyond some other vessels, and I took this boat and came ashore a while ago to see the sights. When I came back I saw that boy in my boat."

"Humph!" murmured the 'longshoreman as he turned away. "You want to take a few lessons in tying ropes. That boy did you a good service."

"I see he did, and I'm sorry I spoke the way I did. I'll give him a reward."

By this time Nat was up on the pier from which he had jumped. He found his clothes, and put them on over his wet undergarments. The day was hot, and he knew the latter would soon dry.

Besides, he was used to being wet half the time, as he and other lads of his acquaintance frequently dived off the stringpiece and swam around in the lake. So when the owner of the rescued rowboat looked for the boy he could not see him. But he determined to make up for his unintentional rudeness, and so went after Nat.

He found the boy with a number of others crowded about the entrance to the freight office.

"May I speak to you a few moments?" asked the young man.

"Guess you'll have to excuse me," replied Nat. "I'm busy."

"What doing?"

"I'm waiting for a job. I may get one helping carry out some light freight, and I need the money."

"How much will you get?"

"Oh, if I'm lucky I may make a dollar."

"I'll give you more than that for saving my boat. I want to explain that I didn't understand what you had done when I spoke so quickly."

"Oh, that's all right," said Nat good-naturedly. "But if you're going to give me a dollar I guess I can afford to quit here," and he stepped out of the line, the gap immediately closing up, for there were many in search of odd jobs to do about the dock whenever a steamer came in.

"Here are five dollars," went on the young man, producing a bank bill.

"Five dollars!" exclaimed Nat. "Say, mister, it ain't worth all that – saving the boat."

"Yes, it is. That craft cost my father quite a sum, and he would have blamed me if she had been smashed. I'm much obliged to you. I'm sorry I thought you were stealing her, but it looked – "

"Forget it," advised Nat with a smile. "It's all right. I'll save boats for you regularly at this price."

"Do you work around the docks – er – "

"My name's Nat Morton," said the lad.

"And mine is John Scanlon," added the other, and he explained how he had come to leave his boat at the float. "I don't know that I will have any more boats to save, as my father's yacht will soon be leaving for Lake Superior. Wouldn't you like a place on her better than your regular job?"

"My regular job? I haven't any. I do whatever I can get to do, and sometimes it's little enough."

"Where do you live?"

"Back there," replied Nat with a wave of his hand toward the tenement district of Chicago.

"What does your father do?"

"I haven't any. He's – he's dead." And Nat's voice broke a little, for his loss had been a comparatively recent one.

"I'm sorry – I beg your pardon – I didn't know – "

"Oh, that's all right," said Nat, bravely keeping his feelings under control. "Dad's been dead a little over two years now. He and I lived pretty good – before that. My mother died when I was a baby. Dad was employed on a lumber barge. He had a good job, and I didn't have to work when he was alive. But after he was lost overboard in a storm one night, that ended all my good times. I've been hustling for myself ever since."

"Didn't he have any life insurance, or anything like that?"

"Not that I know of. I remember he said just before he went on – on his last trip – he told me if it turned out all right he'd have a nice sum in the bank, but I never heard anything about it. They found his body, but there was no money in the clothes, nor any bank books."

"That's too bad. How do you get along?"

"Oh, I make out pretty well. I live with a Mr. William Miller and his wife. They're poor, but they're good to me. He's a 'longshoreman, and he works around the docks. I do, too, whenever there is any work to be had, and I manage to make a living, though it isn't very much of a one."

"No, I presume not. Perhaps if I speak to my father he might give you a position on his boat."

"I'm much obliged to you," replied Nat. "I like boats and the water. I'd like to be a pilot."

"I'm afraid dad couldn't give you that job," answered young Mr. Scanlon. "We have a good pilot."

"And I don't want to leave the Millers," added the boy. "They've been good to me, and I want to pay them back. But isn't that some one calling you?"

He pointed to a figure down on the float, where the boat was tied.

"Yes. That's the mate of my father's steam yacht. Probably father sent him for me. Well, I'll have to say good-by. I hope I'll see you again."

"I hope so, too, especially if you have any more boats you want saved. I'm afraid five dollars is too much."

"Not a bit. Take it and welcome."

"It's more than I could earn in a week," went on Nat as he carefully folded the bill and placed it in his pocket. "All the same, I think I'll try for a job here now. It looks as if they needed lots of hands, because the boat is late."

Bidding John Scanlon good-by Nat turned back to the freight office, in front of which there was now only a small throng looking for employment.

CHAPTER II
A CRY FOR HELP

Owing to the time he had spent talking to the young man whose boat he saved, Nat lost a chance of getting work in helping to unload the steamer. Still he did help to carry some freight to the waiting trucks and drays, and for this he received fifty cents. But as he had five dollars, he did not mind the small sum paid him by the freight agent.

"You weren't around as early as usual," remarked that official as he observed Nat. "You usually make more than this."

"I know it, but I had a job that paid me better," and our hero told about the boat incident.

"Another steamer'll be in day after to-morrow," went on the agent. "Better be around early."

"I will, thanks."

Then, as there was no further opportunity for work on the pier that day, Nat started for the place he called home. It was in a poor tenement, in one of the most congested districts of Chicago.

But if there were dirt and squalor all about, Mrs. Miller did her best to keep her apartment clean. So though the way up to it was by rather dirty stairs, the rooms were neat and comfortable.

"Well, Nat, you're home early, aren't you?" asked the woman, who, with her husband, had befriended the orphan lad.

"Yes, Mrs. Miller."

"I suppose you couldn't get any work?"

"Oh, yes, I got some."

"What's the matter, then? Don't you feel well?"

She could not understand any one coming away so early from a place where there was work, for work, to the poor, means life itself.

"Oh, I did so well I thought I'd take a vacation," and Nat related the incident of the day.

The boy's liking for the water seemed to have been born in him. Soon after his mother had died his father placed him in the care of a family in an inland city. The child seemed to pine away, and an old woman suggested he might want to be near the water, as his father had followed all his life a calling that kept him aboard boats. Though he did not believe much in that theory, Mr. Morton finally consented to place his son to board in Chicago. Nat at once picked up and became a strong, healthy lad.

As he grew older his father took him on short trips with him, so Nat grew to know and love the Great Lakes, as a sailor learns to know and love the ocean.

Soon Nat began asking questions about ships and how they were sailed. His father was a good instructor, and between his terms at school Nat learned much about navigation in an amateur sort of way.

Best of all he loved to stand in the pilot-house, where he was admitted because many navigators knew and liked Mr. Morton. There the boy learned something of the mysteries of steering a boat by the compass and by the lights on shore. He learned navigating terms, and, on one or two occasions, was even allowed to take the spokes of the great wheel in his own small hands.

In this way Nat gained a good practical knowledge of boats. Then came the sad day when he received the news of the death of his father. Though up to that time he had lived in comparative comfort, he now found himself very poor.

For though, as he told John Scanlon, his father had said something about financial matters being better after the delivery of the big load that was on the lumber barge on which he met his death, the boy was too young to understand it.

All he knew was that he had to leave his pleasant boarding place and go to live with a poor family – the Millers – who took compassion on the homeless lad.

Mr. Miller had made an effort to see if Mr. Morton had not left some little money, but his investigation resulted in nothing.

For about two years Nat had lived with the Millers, doing what odd jobs he could find. His liking for the water kept him near the lake, and he had never given up his early ambition to become a pilot some day, though that time seemed very far off.

Every chance Nat got he went aboard the steamers that tied up at the river wharves. In this way he got to know many captains and officers. Some were kind to him and allowed him the run of their ships while at dock. Others were surly, and ordered the boy off.

In this way he became quite a familiar figure about the lake front, and was more or less known to those who had business there.

When Mr. Miller came home the night of Nat's adventure he congratulated the lad on what he had done in the matter of saving the rowboat.

"And I got well paid for it," added Nat as he finished his story and showed the five-dollar bill. "There, Mrs. Miller, we'll have a good dinner Sunday."

"But I can't take your money, Nat," objected the woman.

"Of course you will," he insisted. "That's what it's for. I owe you a lot of back board, anyhow. I didn't get hardly any work last week."

"I hope business will be better next week," said Mr. Miller. "I didn't earn much myself these last few days."

There was little to do at the pier the next day, and the following day quite a severe storm swept over the lake. The boats were late getting to the docks, and the longshoremen and freight handlers had to labor far into the night.

"I don't believe I'll be able to get home to supper, Nat," said Mr. Miller to the lad as they were working near each other on the dock late in the afternoon. "Could you spare time to go up and tell my wife?"

"Sure. I'm almost done with taking out the light stuff. I'll go in about half an hour. Shall I bring you back some lunch?"

"Yes, that would be a good idea, and then I'll not have to stop, and I can earn more."

As Nat was about to leave, the freight agent called to him:

"Where you going, Nat?"

"Home to get some supper for Mr. Miller."

"All right. See me when you come back. I have an errand for you, and I'll give you a quarter if you do it."

"Sure I will. What is it?"

"I want to send a message and some papers to a firm uptown. It's about some freight they're expecting, and the office is keeping open late on account of it. Now hurry home and come back, and I'll have the message ready for you."

Nat was soon back at the pier, with a lunch for Mr. Miller. Then, with the note and papers which the freight agent had ready for him, he started off uptown.

As he was on his way back from the errand, he walked slowly along the water front. He decided he would call at the pier and see if he could help Mr. Miller, so that his benefactor might get through earlier.

Nat reached a wharf some distance away from the one where he had been employed during the day. It seemed to be deserted, though there was a large vessel tied up on one side of it, and two barges on the other.

"I'd like to be a pilot on that big steamer," thought Nat as he contemplated the craft in the glare of an electric light. "That would be a fine job. Well, maybe I'll be on one like her some day."

He was about to walk on, when suddenly the stillness of the night was broken by a cry. It was a shout, and it seemed to come from near the big freight barges.

"Help! help!" cried the voice. "I'm drowning! I'm in the water and I can't get out! Help! help!"

CHAPTER III
NAT'S BRAVE RESCUE

"Somebody must have fallen overboard from one of the barges," thought Nat, for he could now easily determine that the cry came from the side of the dock where the two big freight carriers were tied. "Why doesn't some one there help him?"

But though he thus wondered, he did not hesitate over what to do. He ran out on the pier, and seeing a gangplank leading to one barge, he sprinted up it. The cries continued.

"I'm coming!" the boy shouted. "I'll help you! Where are you?"

"Down between the two barges! I can't get out!" cried a man's voice. "Hurry! help!"

The voice ended in a gurgle.

"He's gone down under water!" exclaimed Nat. "Man overboard!" he loudly cried, thinking some one on the dock or aboard the vessels might hear him and come to help aid in rescuing the imperiled one. But there came no answer. The pier seemed to be deserted.

Nat reached the deck of the first barge and rushed across it to the farthermost rail. He tried to peer down into the black space between the two freight boats, but he could see nothing.

"Where are you?" he called again.

"Here! Right here!" was the answer. "I fell down in between the two barges. I got hold of a rope, but it slipped from me a moment ago, and I went under. I managed to get hold of it again when I came up, but I can't last much longer. Hurry and help me!"

"I will!" exclaimed Nat. "I'm coming down as soon as I can find a rope to cling to. There isn't room to swim down there."

"No; that's right. I can hardly move. But I can't hold on much longer."

"Don't give up!" yelled Nat. "I'll be right there. Queer there isn't some of the crew here," he murmured to himself.

He glanced rapidly about him. There was a lantern burning high up on the smokestack of one of the barges, which were of the latest type, with big engines to turn the large propellers. It was the work of but an instant for Nat to loosen the lantern rope from the cleat and lower the light to the deck. Then cutting the rope, as the quickest method of detaching it from the stack, he hurried with it to the space between the two barges. He lowered the light, and by its gleam saw an elderly man clinging to a rope that dangled from the side of the barge the boy was on.

"That's good; show a light!" exclaimed the man. "Now you can see what to do. But please hurry. My arms are nearly pulled from the sockets."

"I'll have to get a rope that will bear my weight," replied Nat. "Hold on a moment more."

He fastened the lantern cord to the rail, so that the light would hang down in the space between the two vessels. Then he got a long rope, a simple enough matter aboard a vessel. Securing one end to a stanchion, Nat threw the other end down between the barges. Then giving the cable a yank, to see that it was secure, he went down it hand over hand.

"I'll have you out of here now in short order," he said to the half-exhausted man. "Can you pull yourself up by the rope?"

"I'm afraid not. I'm too weak."

This was a problem Nat had not considered. He thought for a moment. He was a bright lad, and his life about the docks had made him resourceful in emergencies.

"I have it!" he exclaimed. "Hold on just a few seconds more."

Twining his legs about the cable to support himself, Nat with one hand made a loop in the rope, using a knot that would not slip. Thus he had a support for his feet.

Standing in the loop he quickly made another below it, for the rope was plenty long enough.

"There!" he cried to the man. "Work your arms into that and then get your head and shoulders through. Put it under your arm-pits, and that will support you until I can haul you up."

"Good idea," murmured the man weakly. With one hand he grasped the loop which Nat let down to him. He evidently was used to cables, for he knew how to handle this one, and in a few seconds he had his head and arms through the loop. This supported him so that he was out of water up to his waist.

"I'll have you out in another minute," declared Nat as he scrambled up the rope hand over hand, until he was once more on the deck of the barge. Then he tried to pull the man up by hauling on the rope, but he found the task too great for his strength.

"I'll have to get help," he said.

"No, no! Don't leave me!" begged the man. "Just lower me another rope, and I can pull myself up."

Nat understood the plan. Quickly running to the other side of the barge, he found a long cable. This he fastened as he had done the first, and he let the length of it dangle between the two vessels so that the man could reach it.

"Pull now!" called the man.

Hauling on the rope about the stranger's shoulders, while the latter aided himself in the work of rescue by pulling on the second rope, the rescued one was soon on the deck of the barge beside Nat. He was so weak that he sank down in a heap as soon as he was over the rail.

"Are you hurt? Can I get you anything? Do you belong aboard this barge?" asked the boy.

"No – no, my lad," said the man slowly. "I'll be all right in a few minutes. I'm exhausted, that's all. My name is Weatherby – "

"What, John Weatherby, the pilot of the *Jessie Drew*?" asked Nat, who knew a number of pilots by their names.

"That's who I am, my lad. You may think it queer that a pilot should fall overboard, but I'll tell you how it happened. First, however, let me thank you with all my heart for what you did for me. But for you I would have been drowned."

"Oh, I guess not."

"Yes, I would. I couldn't have held on much longer, as I'm getting old and I'm not as strong as I was."

"Some one else would have come to your aid."

"I don't know about that. There is no one aboard either of the barges. I didn't know that, or I shouldn't have come here to-night. That vessel over there has gone out of commission, and there is no one aboard her. There's a watchman on the pier, but he didn't hear me calling for help. You saved my life, and I'll not forget it."

"I am glad I was able to," responded Nat.

"What is your name?" asked the pilot. He seemed to be feeling better.

"I'm Nat Morton."

"Nat Morton! I've heard of you. Why, you're the boy who got the rowboat out of the way of the vessel I was bringing in the other day, aren't you?"

"I guess I am."

"Well, I've wanted to meet you to thank you for that. Then, before I get a chance to do it, you do me another favor. I heard about you from a friend of mine – a pilot. He said you were always about the docks."

"Yes, I spend a good deal of my time here. I get occasional jobs, and I like the ships."

"So do I, my lad. The lakes are wonderful bodies of water."

"But hadn't you better go home?" suggested Nat. "You're wet, and, though it's a warm night, you may take cold. It's going to rain," he added, as a flash of lightning came.

"Yes, I will go home if you will help me."

"I will, gladly. Where do you live?"

"I board near here, as it's handy for my business. The *Jessie Drew* is to sail day after to-morrow. I came down here to-night to see a friend of mine, who is captain of one of these grain barges, the second one over there. I didn't know that he and his crew, as well as all those on this barge we're on, had gone ashore. I started to cross from one barge to the other, and I fell down between them. I called and called, but it seemed as if help would never come."

"I'm glad I happened to be passing," replied Nat. "Now, if you feel able, we'll go ashore."

"Yes, I'm all right now. I'll go to my boarding place and get some dry things. Do you work around here?"

"I help Mr. Miller – he's the man I live with – whenever I can. He's working to-night, helping unload a vessel that was delayed by the storm."

"Yes, it's blowing quite hard. I didn't notice it so much down between those barges, but now I feel quite chilly. So you work on the pier, eh?"

"Whenever I can get anything to do. But I'd like to get a job on a steamer."

"You would, eh? What kind?"

"Well, I'd like to be a pilot, but I suppose I'd have to work my way up. I'd be willing to start at almost anything, if I could get on a vessel."

"You would, eh?" said the pilot, and then he seemed to be busily thinking.

The two walked down the gangplank and off the pier, meeting no one, for the wind, and an occasional dash of rain, made it unpleasant to be out, and the watchman was probably snugly sitting in some sheltered place.

"This is my boarding place," said Mr. Weatherby at length, as they came to a small house on a street leading up from the lake front. "I can't properly thank you now, but – I wish you'd come and see me to-morrow, when you're not working," he added.

"I'll be glad to call and find out how you are."

"Oh, I'll be all right. Now, be sure to come, I – I may have some good news for you." And with that the old pilot went into the house, leaving a very much wondering youth on the sidewalk.

CHAPTER IV
GETTING A JOB

"Now, why in the world didn't he tell me what he wanted of me, instead of keeping me guessing?" thought Nat, as he made his way back to the dock where Mr. Miller was working. "I wonder what it can be? If he wanted to thank me he could just as well have done it now as to-morrow.

"Maybe he wants to give me a reward," the boy went on musingly. "I don't believe I'd take it. Accepting money for rescuing a boat is all well enough, but not for saving life. Besides, if I hadn't done it somebody else would. No; if he offers me money I don't believe I'll take it. Still, I do need some new clothes," and he glanced down at the rather ragged garments he was wearing.

"I've been waiting for you some time," Mr. Miller said when Nat got back. "I thought you said you wouldn't be gone long on that errand."

"Neither I was."

"What kept you, then?"

"Well, I had to rescue a man."

"Rescue a man? Are you joking?"

"Not a bit of it. I pulled Mr. Weatherby, the pilot, out from between two barges." And Nat proceeded to relate his adventure.

"Well, things are certainly coming your way," remarked Mr. Miller. "Maybe he'll give you a big reward."

"I'd rather he'd give me a good job," returned Nat. "Maybe he could get me a place on some boat. That's what I'd like. I could earn good money then."

"I wouldn't like to see you go away from us, Nat. My wife and I have become quite attached to you."

"I would not like to go, Mr. Miller, for I have been very happy in your home. So I'm not going to think about it."

"Still, I would like to see you prosper in this world," went on the man who had befriended Nat. "If you have a chance to get a place on a boat, take it. You may be able to come and see us once in a while, between trips."

"I will always consider my home at your house."

"I hope you will, Nat."

"Still, nothing may happen," went on the boy. "Did you get the ship all unloaded?"

"Yes, the holds are emptied, and I have a job to-morrow helping load her. I guess you could get something to do if you came down."

"Then I shall."

"But I thought you were going to call on Mr. Weatherby?"

"I am, but he told me to come when I was not working. He is going to be home all day."

"That will be all right, then. Now let's hurry home. I think it's going to rain harder soon, and my wife will probably be worrying about me."

The storm, which had been a fitful one all day and part of the night, showed signs of becoming worse. The wind was more violent, and when Mr. Miller and Nat were nearly home it began to rain in torrents.

The rain continued all the next day, but as the wharf where Mr. Miller and Nat worked was a covered one, they did not mind the storm. At noon-time the boy found a chance to go to the boarding-house of Mr. Weatherby.

"Well, here comes my life-saver!" greeted the old pilot. "How are you feeling to-day?"

"Very well, sir. How are you?"

"Not so good as I might be. I'm lame and stiff from pulling on that rope, but I think I'll be able to sail to-morrow. I believe you told me last night that you would like a job on a ship," the pilot went on.

"Yes, sir," replied Nat, his heart beating high with hope.

"Hum! Well, what kind of a job would you like – pilot or captain?"

"I think I'd rather begin a little lower down," replied Nat with a smile, for he saw that Mr. Weatherby was joking.

"Perhaps that would be best. Well, as it happens, I have a chance to get a young lad a position on the steamer of which I am pilot. You see, I have a steady job piloting. My vessel, the *Jessie Drew*, makes trips all over the lakes, and Captain Wilson Marshall, who is a part owner, is not so familiar with all the harbors and the various routes as I am. So he engages me steadily. In fact, he and I are old friends, as well as distantly related; so I have a somewhat different position than do most pilots."

"And can you get me a job on a boat – your boat?" asked Nat eagerly.

"I think I can. I may say I am sure I can. The captain asked me yesterday to look out for a bright youth to help with the cargo, assist the purser, and be a sort of cabin assistant. I had no one in mind then, but after our meeting last night, when you were of such service to me, and I heard you say you wanted a job, I at once thought of this place. I saw the captain this morning, and he has practically engaged you – that is, if you want the berth, and he is satisfied with you when he sees you. The last item I know will be all right. And now it is for you to say whether you want the place."

"Want it? Of course I want it! I can't tell you how much obliged I am to you for this! I – "

"Now – now – don't get excited over it," cautioned Mr. Weatherby. "If you're going to be a pilot you must learn to keep cool. Shall I tell Captain Marshall you'll take the place?"

"Yes, and be glad to."

"Not quite so fast. Why don't you ask me what the wages are, and how long you'll have to work?"

"That's so. I didn't think of that. But I don't mind how long I have to work. It can't be much longer than I have to work now, and I get very little for it."

"Then I guess you will be satisfied with the hours and the wages paid aboard the *Jessie Drew*. When can you come?"

"Any time. I am not regularly hired at the dock."

"Then perhaps you had better stop now, go home and get ready. We will sail early to-morrow. Bring along a change of clothes, for it often happens you'll get wet through in a storm, or when the lake is rough."

"I'm afraid I can't do that," said Nat slowly, as a change came over his face.

"Why not?"

"Well – er – that is – you see, I haven't any other clothes. These are all I've got. Mr. and Mrs. Miller are very poor. Her husband doesn't earn much, and I don't, either. It takes all we both get to buy food and pay the rent. I don't have any left for clothes. They're not good enough to go on board the boat with. I'm afraid I can't take the job."

"There is no use denying that the clothes might be better," admitted Mr. Weatherby gravely. "Not that I care anything about what garments a man or boy wears, so long as they are clean, and yours are that. Still, I think it would make a better impression on Captain Marshall if you were to have a newer suit. I'll tell you what I'll do. Here, you take this money and go and get yourself a good suit and some underwear, and whatever else you need."

"I can't take your money – I haven't earned it," objected Nat, who was quite independent.

"Nonsense, boy. Take it as a loan, then, to be paid back whenever you feel like it. It's a pity if I can't do a good turn to the lad who pulled me up from between those vessels. You will offend me if you don't take it. Besides, I want you to have this job. I may need you to save my life again, and, to be frank with you, I shouldn't like Captain Marshall to see the boy I recommended in such clothes, though, as I said, personally I don't care a rap about them."

"All right," replied Nat quietly. "If you put it that way I'll borrow this money."

"That's the way to talk. Now you'd better go, buy what you need, and then come back to me this evening," went on Mr. Weatherby, handing Nat some bankbills. "I will then take you down to the ship and introduce you to Captain Marshall. You'll probably stay aboard all night, so you had better tell your friends good-by."

"Where is the ship going to?"

"I don't know exactly. We'll probably call at several lake ports to unload or take on cargo. Now you'd better go, and be back here about seven o'clock."

Nat hurried back to the wharf to tell Mr. Miller the good news. His friend rejoiced with him, though he was sorry to see the boy leave. When Nat reached the tenement and told Mrs. Miller, that lady cried a little, for she had grown to love the boy almost as a son. She went out shopping with him, and in a few hours Nat was ready to step aboard the *Jessie Drew* and take a long voyage.

It was not easy to part from his kind friends, but he was consoled by the thought that he would soon see them again.

At the appointed hour he was at Mr. Weatherby's boarding-house, and a little later the two were going aboard the big lake steamer.

"Ah, Mr. Weatherby!" exclaimed a man as Nat and the pilot stepped on the deck, "you're aboard early, I see."

"Yes; I didn't want to get left. Mr. Bumstead, let me introduce a friend of mine to you. He did me a great service. This is Nat Morton. Nat, this is Mr. Bumstead, the first mate."

Nat shook hands with the mate. That official was not a very kindly looking person. He had red hair, and he seemed surly, even when he smiled, which was not often.

"Is he going to take a voyage with you?" asked the mate of the pilot.

"Yes. He's going to help out in the purser's office. I got him the job."

"You did!" exclaimed the mate.

"Yes. What of it? You seem quite surprised, Mr. Bumstead. I recommended Nat for the place because he saved my life."

"Has Captain Marshall given him the place?" asked the mate in a surly tone.

"Yes. Why?"

"Because I had recommended my nephew for the place, and he would have got it, too, if you hadn't interfered. I'm going to see the captain about it later. It's not fair, giving a landlubber a good job aboard this ship. I'll have him put ashore. I told my nephew he could have the job, and he's going to get it!"

With that the mate strode off, muttering to himself.

"I'm sorry about that," said Mr. Weatherby in a low voice. "I didn't know he had any one for the place. Nat, I'm afraid he'll make trouble for you. You'll have to be on your guard, but I'll do all I can for you."

"I guess I can look out for myself," replied the boy. "I haven't lived around the docks all my life for nothing."

But Nat did not know the perils that were in store for him, nor to what lengths the vindictive mate would go to be revenged.

CHAPTER V
NAT IN TROUBLE

Captain Marshall proved to be a kind man, but rather strict in his views. The pilot introduced Nat to him, and the commander of the *Jessie Drew* gravely shook hands with the lad.

"I have heard about you," he said, and Nat began to think he was getting to be a person of some importance. "I saw what you did the day that drifting rowboat got in our way, though, at the time, I didn't know it was you. Mr. Weatherby has told me what you did for him, and I must congratulate you on your quickness and wit in an emergency. That is what we need on a vessel.

"The purser will tell you what to do. You must remember one thing aboard a ship, especially when we're out on the lake; the thing to do is to obey orders at once, and ask the reason for them afterward. I expect you to do that. If you do you'll not get into trouble. I shall have a friendly eye on you, and I trust you will do as well as the pilot thinks you will. Now you may report to the purser, who really is more of a supercargo than he is a purser. He'll find plenty for you to do."

"Yes, sir," replied Nat, wondering just what his duties would be. He knew where to find the man who was to be his immediate superior, for on the way to the captain's cabin Mr. Weatherby had pointed out to Nat where the purser's office was.

"Oh, yes; you're the new boy," said the purser, whose name was George Dunn. "Well, come into my office, and I'll show you part of what you'll have to do during the voyage."

It was fortunate that Nat knew something about ships and the terms used aboard them, or he would have been sadly confused by what Mr. Dunn told him. As it was, much that he heard he did not comprehend. He found that part of his duties were to make out lists of the freight, enter the shipments on bills, put them in various books, check up manifests and way-bills, and help the purser verify the freight as it was taken on or put off.

Luckily Nat had had a fair education before his father died, and he could write a good hand and read excellently. He was not very accurate at figures, but he was bright and quick to learn.

"I guess that will do for to-night," said Mr. Dunn when it came nine o'clock. "I had most of the stuff checked up before you came aboard, or there'd have been more to do. However, we'll manage to keep you busy in the morning."

"I wonder if I'll ever get a chance to learn to be a pilot?" said Nat, for the purser seemed so friendly that he ventured to speak to him of that pet ambition.

"I shouldn't wonder. We're not very busy once we get loaded up, and often when sailing between ports a long distance apart there is little to do for days at a time. If you want to learn navigation, and Mr. Weatherby will teach you, I don't see why you can't do it."

"I hope I can."

"Come on, and I'll show you where you'll bunk," went on Mr. Dunn. "You want to turn out lively at six bells in the morning."

"That's seven o'clock," observed Nat.

"Right you are, my hearty. I see you know a little something about a ship. That's good. Oh, I guess you'll get along all right."

It seemed to Nat that he had not been asleep at all when six strokes on a bell, given in the way that sailors ring the time, with short, double blows, awoke him. He dressed hurriedly, had his breakfast with the others of the crew, and then did what he could to help the purser, who had to check up some boxes that arrived at the last minute, just before the ship sailed.

A little later, amid what seemed a confusion of orders, the *Jessie Drew* moved away down the river, and Nat was taking his first voyage on Lake Michigan as a hand on a ship – a position he had long desired to fill, but which hitherto had seemed beyond his wildest dreams.

"How do you like it?" asked Mr. Weatherby, a little later, as he passed the boy on his way to the pilot-house.

"Fine."

"I'm glad of it. Attend strictly to business, and you'll get along. I'll keep you in mind, and whenever I get a chance I'll take you into the pilot-house, and begin to instruct you in the method of steering a ship."

"I'll be ever so much obliged to you if you will."

"Why, that's nothing, after what you did for me," replied Mr. Weatherby, with a kind smile at Nat.

As sailing on large vessels was not much of a novelty to Nat, except of late years, since his father's death, he did not linger long on deck, watching the various sights as the freighter plowed her way out on Lake Michigan. He went to the purser's office, to see if there was anything that needed to be done. He had temporarily forgotten about the mate's threat to have him discharged.

As Nat drew near the place, he heard voices in dispute, and, when he entered, he was surprised to see the first mate, Mr. Bumstead, standing at the purser's desk, shaking his fist in the air.

"I tell you those boxes are not aboard!" exclaimed the mate.

"And I say they are," replied the purser firmly. "They are down on my list as being taken on this morning, and – er – what's his name – that new boy – Nat – Nat Morton checked them off. You can see for yourself."

"Oh, he checked 'em off, did he?" asked the mate, in altered tones. "Now I begin to see where the trouble is. We'll ask him – ?"

"Here he is now," interrupted Mr. Dunn, as Nat entered. "Did you check up these boxes?" he asked, and he handed a part of the cargo list to Nat.

"Yes, sir. They were the last things that came aboard this morning."

"I told you so!" exclaimed Mr. Dunn, turning to the mate.

"Wait a minute," went on that officer. "He says he checked 'em off, but I don't believe he did. If he did, where are they? They can't have fallen overboard, and I didn't eat 'em, I'm sure of that."

"I checked those boxes off as you called them to me, Mr. Bumstead," replied Nat. "You stood near the forward cargo hold, and the boxes were stowed away there. I was careful in putting them down on my list."

"Yes! Too careful, I guess!" exclaimed the mate angrily. "You've got down ten more boxes than came aboard. That's a nice mess to make of it! But I knew how it would be if the captain took a greenhorn aboard! Why didn't he get some one who knew how to check a cargo?"

"I know how to check a cargo," replied Nat quietly.

"I say you don't! There are ten boxes missing, and you've got to find them, that's all there is about it!"

"Everything down on my list came aboard," insisted Nat.

"Well, those ten boxes didn't, and I know it. You made a mistake, that's what you did, or else you let the boxes fall overboard, and you're afraid to admit it."

"No boxes fell overboard when I was checking up, Mr. Bumstead."

"Well, where are those ten missing ones then?"

"I don't know."

"Of course you don't. And no one else does. You made a mistake, that's all, and it's going to be a bad one. It puts me to a lot of work. I'll have to check over all my lists to make up for your blunder."

"I made no blunder."

"I say you did, and I'm going to report you to Captain Marshall. I'm not going to work with a greenhorn, who don't know enough to check up a simple list. I'll report you, that's what I'll do, and we'll see how long you'll have a berth on this ship!"

Angrily muttering to himself, the mate started for the captain's cabin, while poor Nat, much distressed over the trouble into which he had gotten, stood dejectedly in the purser's office.

CHAPTER VI
AN UNEXPECTED DISCOVERY

"Don't let him worry you," said Mr. Dunn consolingly. "He's a surly fellow, and he's always interfering in my department."

"But the captain may discharge me," replied Nat. "Still, I am sure those boxes came aboard. I counted them carefully and I don't believe I would be ten out of the way."

"Of course not. Probably the mate stowed them in some other place and he's forgotten all about it. They'll turn up."

"I hope so, for I would not like to make a mistake the first day out."

At that moment a deckhand came up to where Nat stood talking to the purser.

"Captain wants to see you," he said to the boy.

"Don't get excited now," advised Mr. Dunn. "Here, take our checking list with you and tell the captain exactly how it happened. If you are sure the boxes came aboard say so – and stick to it."

"I will," answered Nat, and, with rather an uneasy feeling, he went aft to where the captain's cabin was located.

He found the mate there, looking quite excited, while Captain Marshall was far from calm. Evidently there had been high words between the men.

"What is this, Nat?" asked the captain. "The mate says he is short ten boxes. You have them on your list as coming aboard, but they are not to be found. You know that will make trouble, to have anything wrong with the cargo."

"I'm sure nothing is wrong," replied Nat. "I went over my list carefully, and I am positive the boxes are on board."

"And I say they're not," insisted the mate. "I guess I've been in this business long enough to know more than a green lad who has only been here a day."

"You want to be careful, Nat," went on Captain Marshall. "I have always depended on Mr. Bumstead in regard to matters connected with the stowing of the cargo."

"I am sure those boxes are aboard, sir," went on Nat firmly. "If you will allow me to take a look I think I can find them."

"What! Go through all the cargo after it's stowed away!" exclaimed the angry mate. "I guess not much! I'll not allow it!"

The door of the cabin opened and there entered the pilot, Mr. Weatherby. He started back on seeing the mate and Nat.

"Oh, excuse me," he said. "I didn't know you had any one in here, Captain Marshall."

"That's all right, come right in," replied the commander. "There's a little difficulty between Nat and Mr. Bumstead, and I'm trying to straighten it out."

He related what had taken place, and told of the missing boxes.

"And there you are," he finished. "It seems to be quite a mix-up, and I'm sorry, for I like to keep my cargo and the records of it straight."

"Hum," murmured the pilot. "Mr. Bumstead says the boxes are not here, and Nat says they came aboard, eh? Well, I should think the easiest way would be to look and see if they are here or not."

"That's what I proposed," exclaimed Nat eagerly.

"Yes! I guess I'll have you disturbing the whole cargo to look for ten small boxes!" exclaimed the mate. "Not much I won't! I'm right, and I know it!"

"No, I think Nat is right," said Mr. Weatherby quietly.

"Do you mean to tell me I made a mistake?" inquired Mr. Bumstead.

"I don't know whether you did or not. But I know Nat's plan is the only one that can decide the matter. If the boxes came aboard the last thing, they can't be very far down among the rest of the cargo. It will not take long to look. What do you say, captain?"

Captain Marshall was in a sort of quandary. The mate was his chief officer, and he wanted to be on his side because Mr. Bumstead owned some shares in the ship, and also because Mr. Bumstead relieved the commander of a lot of work that, otherwise, would have fallen to the share of the captain. On the other hand Mr. Marshall did not want to offend the pilot. In addition to being a relative of his, Mr. Weatherby was one of the stockholders in the company which owned the steamer *Jessie Drew*, and, as the captain was an employee of this company, he did not want to oppose one of the officers of it.

"I suppose that's the only way out of it," the captain finally said, though with no very good grace. "Only the whole cargo must not be upset looking for those boxes."

"I'll be careful," promised Nat. "I think I know where they were stowed."

"Um! You think you do, but you'll soon find you're much mistaken!" said the mate scornfully.

"I'll give you a hand," said the pilot. "Mr. Simmon, my helper, is in the pilot-house," he went on, in answer to a questioning glance from Captain Marshall. "The ship is on a straight course now, and we'll hold it for an hour or two. Now, Nat, come on, and we'll see if we can't solve this puzzle."

It did not take long to demonstrate that Nat was right, and the mate wrong. The ten boxes were found in the afterhold, where they had been put by mistake, which accounted for the mate not being able to find them.

"What have you to say now?" asked the pilot of Mr. Bumstead, when the search was so successfully ended.

"What have I to say? Nothing, except that I think you did a mean thing when you got this boy in here, and kept my nephew out of the place, which he needs so much. But I'll get even with him yet for coming here." It appeared the mate's protest to Captain Marshall, about employing Nat, had been of no effect.

"I guess Nat needed a place to work as much as did your nephew," replied Mr. Weatherby, when his *protégé* had gone back to the purser's cabin. "His father is dead, and you ought to be glad that the orphan son of an old lake sailor has a chance to earn his living, instead of making it hard for him."

"Was his father a lake sailor?" asked the mate quickly.

"Yes. Nat's father was James Morton, who was employed on a lumber barge."

"James Morton! On a lumber barge!" exclaimed the mate, turning pale. "Are you sure of that?"

"Certainly. But what of it? Did you know Mr. Morton?"

"Jim Morton," murmured the mate. "I might have recognized the name. So his son is aboard this vessel! I must do something, or – "

"What was that you said?" asked the pilot, who had not caught the mate's words.

"Nothing – I – er – I thought I used to know his father – but – but it must be another man."

The mate was clearly very much excited over something.

"Now look here!" exclaimed Mr. Weatherby sternly. "Nat is not to blame for coming here. I got him the place, and I'll look out for him, too. If you try any of your tricks I'll take a hand in the game myself. Now, I've given you your course, and I want you to keep on it. If you run afoul of me you'll be sorry for it."

The mate turned aside, muttering to himself, but the pilot thought it was because he had made a mistake about the boxes.

"Look out for him, Nat," said Mr. Weatherby, a little later, after the pilot had reported to the captain the result of the search for the missing boxes. "He seems to have some grudge against you, and he'll do you an injury if he can."

"I believe that," replied Nat, "though I can't see why he should. I never injured him, and it was not my fault that I got the place he wanted for his nephew."

"No, of course not. But keep your weather eye open."

"I will."

Captain Marshall showed no very great pleasure at finding that Nat was in the right. The truth was he feared the mate would be chagrined over the mistake he himself had made, and Captain Marshall was the least bit afraid of Mr. Bumstead, for the commander knew the mate was aware of certain shortcomings in regard to the management of the vessel, and he feared his chief officer might disclose them.

"You want to be careful of your lists," the commander said to Nat. "You were right this time, but next time you might be wrong."

Nat's pleasure at finding he had not made a mistake was a little dampened by the cool way in which the captain took it, but Mr. Weatherby told him not to mind, but to do his work as well as he could, and he would get along all right.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.