

CHAPTER XII.

THE LAUNCH.

THE boys were, naturally, very anxious to start on their cruise to the Everglades as soon as possible, but yet they felt that Captain Sammy was making a very rash promise when he said the *Pearl* would be repaired in two days.

Eager as they were to have the work done, they did not think it could be accomplished so quickly; but they resolved to waste no time, in order that they might do their full share.

Therefore, while Captain Sammy was smoking contentedly on the beach, they set about a thorough cleaning of the interior, which promised to be a long task.

Then a new difficulty presented itself: the engine needed prompt and skilled attention, and neither of the boys had the slightest knowledge of machinery. The more Dare thought about the matter the more firmly was he convinced that they were utterly powerless to act in that department, and in his perplexity he appealed to Captain Sammy.

"Of course you don't know anything about the

engine, and no more do I," replied the little man, quietly. "What you've got to do is to hire Tom Rogers for two or three days, let him put the engine in good condition, and then teach you how to run it. I'll send him over here in the morning, and you can make a trade with him."

Thus the trouble which at first looked so serious to the boys was easily settled, and they continued their work of cleaning and scrubbing until long after the little captain had hobbled home.

It was sunset when they ate their supper, and during that pleasing and important duty Mr. and Mrs. Evans paid them a visit.

They were both very much surprised at the progress which had been made, and Mr. Evans, old as he was, could hardly conceal the pleasure of a boy at the sight of the trim little craft.

If Mrs. Evans had had any doubts about the wisdom of allowing the boys to take such a long trip as that to the Everglades was, those doubts were all dispelled, and her mind set perfectly at rest, when she heard what Captain Sammy had said about going with them.

Mr. Evans told Dare that he might engage the machinist whom Captain Sammy was to send to remain with them until both he and Charley could manage the engine; and then he and his

wife returned to the hotel, taking Charley with them, that he might bring a supply of clean clothes and more provisions to the tent.

There was very little time lost in trying to get to sleep that night after Charley returned. The hard work during the day and the wakefulness of the preceding night had the effect of closing their eyes in slumber almost as soon as they were stretched out on the camp-bed.

They slept the next morning until after Captain Sammy arrived and shouted, "Shipmates, ahoy!" in his gruffest tones, and then they scrambled out, feeling decidedly ashamed at being found in bed when the little man was there and ready for work.

It was a very hurried toilet and a still more hasty breakfast they made that morning, and while they were thus engaged Captain Sammy had ordered two men whom he had brought with him to go to work.

One was the machinist, and he agreed to put the engine in thorough working order in two days, while he thought that in that time, if one of the boys would help him, he could give him such instruction as would enable him to run the engine as much as would be needed on the proposed trip.

The man said his charges would be three dollars per day, and Dare engaged him to remain with them as long as was necessary, provided he

did not get through as quickly as he had thought he could.

"You'd better keep him with you until you get down to San Carlos harbor," said Captain Sammy, and Dare concluded the bargain, subject to his father's approval.

When the question came up as to which boy should turn engineer Dare thought he ought to take that post, since there was likely to be more work involved; but Captain Sammy settled the matter by saying,

"Let Charley attend to the engine, and Bobby can help him. You are the oldest, and should be the skipper, for that is really the hardest position, and one which requires the longest head. You must remember that you are going into waters about which you know nothing, and an error of judgment may wreck the *Pearl* where she can't be raised, as she was here."

Since Captain Sammy's words amounted virtually to a decision, Charley and Bobby went into the engine-room with Tom Rogers, while Captain Sammy, the man he had brought with him, and Dare set to work closing up the hole in the bows.

When done by one who understood the work as thoroughly as Captain Sammy did, it was neither a long nor a difficult task to make the little steamer water-tight again.

The plan was to seal up her hull with a single

covering of cedar boards about an inch thick, and when those which had been shattered were removed it was a simple matter to replace them with the ones Captain Sammy had brought with him.

So simple was the work to Captain Sammy and his man that by six o'clock the hull of the *Pearl* had been made as good as ever, and the new timbers had received the first coat of white-lead, over which was to be put two coats of paint.

Rogers had progressed much more slowly in the engine-room, because it was necessary to take the machinery entirely apart and free it from the rust that had, under the action of the salt-water, begun to gather.

The hired men stopped work promptly at six o'clock, and Captain Sammy went away with them; but the boys continued their work of "cleaning up" as long after supper as it was possible for them to see what they were about.

On the following morning they took very good care that Captain Sammy should not find them asleep when he came, and when the day was done the work on the *Pearl* was finished. Nothing remained but to launch her.

But it was now Saturday night, and as it was necessary that the paint should dry as much as possible, Captain Sammy decided that they would not launch her until Monday, which plan

would enable them to start on their cruise Tuesday morning, if they were so disposed.

That night the boys went to the hotel, to remain over Sunday. It was not necessary for any one to keep watch over the *Pearl*, and they had had enough of camp life to make them willing to sleep in a comfortable bed, as well as to eat their food at a table.

Captain Sammy had agreed to furnish the necessary bedding, cooking utensils, and coal, while upon the boys was to rest the duty of victualling of the craft.

Therefore Dare and his father had considerable business to attend to that evening, for the question had to be settled whether Mr. Evans would be willing to buy for them provisions sufficient to last on the long voyage they proposed to take.

Dare was very much afraid that his father would not consent, and therefore it was with anxious hearts that Charley and Bobby accompanied him when he went into the room to ask the important question.

In order that there might be no mistake about it Dare first told his father that, now that the raising of the *Pearl* was an accomplished fact, they had come for his permission to make a long trip through the Everglades, or as far in as they could go in the yacht. Dare also told him what portion of the outfit of the steamer

Captain Sammy would furnish, and concluded by asking if he would buy the provisions for them.

Mr. Evans' answer was as satisfactory as it was prompt:

"I already have to pay for the use of the lumber you hired, and shall be obliged to pay the machinist. Now, I am willing to purchase the things necessary for the cruise, provided you all give up your allowance of spending-money, and provided you learn all that is possible of the State which you are in, and the peculiar formation of the lower portion of it."

There was no question as to whether the boys would accept such a generous offer, and it would have been impossible to find three more happy boys in the entire State of Florida than Dare, Charley, and Bobby.

The Monday on which the *Pearl* was to be launched came at last, as all days will, however the time may drag, and the boys were up and on the beach at an early hour in the morning, even though the tide would not serve for the important ceremony until nearly evening.

With the exception of Rogers's work on the machinery, there was nothing more that could be done until the little steamer was afloat; but Charley had enough to occupy his attention in receiving his lesson on steam-engines in general and that belonging to the *Pearl* in particular.

Bobby had been present in the capacity of general assistant during the two previous days, and on the day of the launch he was still there, seeming to think his presence was absolutely necessary.

Thus Dare was left alone, as it were, until such time as Captain Sammy should come, for the engine-room of the *Pearl* was so small that it was impossible for more than three to get into it and have an opportunity to work.

He had left the boat to go to the tent while he was still waiting for Captain Sammy, when he saw a movement among the bushes that skirted the shore, and then a small, familiar-looking head was protruded on a short voyage of discovery.

There could be no mistake as to the ownership of that head, for it belonged to the former pirate of Tampa, and the stealthy manner in which it had been shown betokened mischief.

"Where's the old heathen?" whispered Tommy, as soon as Dare had approached him.

"I'm expecting him every minute now, and you must be careful not to let him see you, or I'm afraid he might punish you for wrecking the boat."

"He'll see me more'n he wants to before long," said Master Tucker, with a tinge of the old swagger in his tones. "I was goin' past his dock last night, an' he started after me, an' when he

found he couldn't catch me he shied a stick an' hit me on the arm. Now I'm goin' to serve him out, promise or no promise, an' I've come to warn you. That's his steamer, an' even if he has lent it to you I'm—"

The sentence was not finished, owing to the fact that the head was suddenly withdrawn, and a quick rustling of the bushes told that its owner was carrying it away at full speed, while the sight of Captain Sammy on the beach told the reason of the haste.

Dare was alarmed lest Tommy meditated "serving Captain Sammy out" by doing some injury to the *Pearl*, and he resolved to speak with the little man regarding it before he left him that night.

There was no chance for conversation then, for the Captain bustled and fussed around with his preparations for the launch, ordering Dare here and there until he got so confused that he hardly knew what he was about.

When he was ready to put the finishing touches to his work those in the engine-room were called out on to the beach, and Dare ordered to go on board. He was to stand in the bows, to throw over the anchors as soon as the launch had been accomplished, and both the other boys envied him the position.

Mr. and Mrs. Evans, who had promised to be present at the ceremony, arrived about fifteen

minutes before the appointed time, and Captain Sammy was kept remarkably busy in trying to do his work and explain everything to the visitors at the same time.

Finally all was ready, the last block was laid, and the captain and Rogers began knocking away the timbers that held the *Pearl* prisoner.

Then she started, slowly at first, her speed increasing each second, until she struck the water with a force that dashed the spray up around her in great volumes, and once more the *Pearl* was afloat.

Those on shore set up a loud shout of triumph, to which Dare responded by waving his hat, and then he let go both anchors.

Just as this was done, and he was thinking with pride that the beautiful little craft was at his disposal for some time at least, he caught a glimpse of Tommy Tucker, who was standing among the trees, peering out, as if plotting some mischief against the little steamer; and that sight destroyed all Dare's pleasure for the time being.