

CHAPTER XVIII.

UP THE CALOOSAHATCHEE.

IT was at Punta Rassa that Tom Rogers was to leave the *Pearl*, and Charley to take his place at the engine; and that night, while Captain Sammy was on deck, making everything fast and snug, Dare found an opportunity of whispering to Tommy that he hoped to get him ashore in the morning.

A mail-steamer made weekly trips between Punta Rassa, Tampa, and Cedar Keys, and it was very probable that Tommy could beg a passage upon her, if he could not induce Rogers to take him; therefore it seemed to be of the highest importance that the pirate should leave the *Pearl* at that point.

Under pretence of wanting to remain on deck awhile after Captain Sammy had finished his work there, the three boys secured an opportunity of discussing the matter; and many and varied were the plans offered and rejected by which it would be possible to steal Tommy Tucker from under the very nose of his enemy.

Of course, if Captain Sammy should take it

into his head to go on shore the next morning, then everything would be as simple as a bow on a hat-band; but the boys had every reason to believe, from what they had heard him say, that it was his intention to land Rogers at a very early hour in the morning, and then push directly up the river, in order to reach Fort Simmons by sunset.

"Can't he swim ashore?" asked Bobby, after almost every other way had been discussed.

"Of course not," replied Dare. "There are sharks and alligators both around here, as thick as the mosquitoes, and he would go where Captain Sammy's leg went before you could count five."

"Well," said Charley, with a sigh of resignation, "it won't do any good to sit here all night talking about it. We'd better go to bed now, so as to be up as early as any one else in the morning."

Charley's advice was good, and all hands followed it, so far as going to bed went; but the mosquitoes interfered sadly with their attempts to sleep. It seemed as if there were perfect swarms of those musical little insects in the cabin, and Dare thought the pirate was being punished severely by being obliged to remain in the small space under the berth and refrain from making a noise.

It would have been impossible for the pris-

oner to have moved around the cabin any that night, for Captain Sammy was up and down like a Jack-in-a-box, and the first move would have been sure to result in detection.

At last the boys dropped off to sleep one by one; and when they awakened again Captain Sammy was in the engine-room preparing Roger's breakfast, so that he could get on shore very early.

If Dare had counted on Charley's assistance in getting rid of their troublesome passenger, he was disappointed, for Rogers called him into the engine-room as soon as he was up, and kept him there, giving additional orders and instructions relative to the working of the engine.

While Dare was in the cabin, on the alert to every move Captain Sammy made, he saw Tommy's head cautiously protruded from under the berth, and heard the unhappy pirate whisper,

"You'll be certain to get me out of this to-day, won't you?"

"I'll do the best I can," replied Dare, bending low over the berth, that no one should hear his whisper; "but I don't see how it's to be done."

"I shall die if I have to stay here any longer, I know I shall, for it's just awful," and the two tears that rolled down the pirate's cheeks attested to the fact of his suffering.

There was no time for Dare to express his sympathy, for Captain Sammy entered the cabin

just then, and Tommy withdrew his head so quickly that he hit it a terrible thump on the berth above, which must have taken his mind, for a few moments at least, from the fact of his imprisonment.

"Do any of the boys want to see the town?" the little man asked.

"I don't think they do, sir. Of course, if you want to send there for anything, any of us will go."

"No, I don't want to send, for I am going on shore myself to carry Rogers. I thought, if any of you wanted to go, you'd better be getting ready. But it's just as well you don't, for there ain't more than twenty houses there, and really nothing to see."

Dare's heart seemed to come up into his throat, so great was his delight that Captain Sammy was going ashore, for it seemed almost certain that, once left alone, they could dispose of Tommy in some way.

He found an opportunity of warning Charley not to express any desire to see Punta Rassa, and then went on deck to say "good-bye" to Rogers.

"Have everything ready so that we can leave the moment I get back," shouted Captain Sammy, as the little tender left the *Pearl*; and even as he shouted the boys could hear Tommy scurrying around below, probably engaged in stretching his legs.

Strange as it may seem, the boys had not once thought that they should be without the means of reaching the shore after Captain Sammy left in the tender, and Dare's joy at his going was very short-lived, for he realized when the little craft left the *Pearl* that he and his crew were quite as much prisoners as was Tommy.

"There's only one chance," he said, mournfully, to Charley, "and that is in a boat coming along-side, or near us, while he is gone. Let's, all hands, keep a bright look-out, and if we see any kind of a craft hail her."

Tommy was perfectly quiet below, and there was no doubt but that he was making rapid inroads on the larder.

The watch on the bow of the *Pearl* was not continued very long, for in five minutes after Captain Sammy stepped ashore he was seen returning, with some bundles in his hands, and he started directly for the steamer.

"It's all up now," said Dare, with a groan. "Our trip is spoiled, all because of Tommy; for I know something dreadful will happen when Captain Sammy sees him, and there isn't much chance that we can keep him hidden very long."

Then he went down to tell the prisoner that he must get into his dungeon again, or, what would be altogether for the best, show himself, and be set ashore as soon afterward as the little captain would permit.

As to the last proposal Tommy showed such signs of fear that it was useless to urge it. He declared that he had rather jump overboard and run the risk of being eaten by the sharks, which death he thought would be far easier than the one the captain would mete out to him. He insisted that there would be plenty of opportunities for him to get on shore after they were farther up the river, and that he would gladly take the chances of the walk through the woods to Punta Rassa, rather than face his enemy.

Then Charley proposed that he should hide under the little berth off the engine-room, rather than in the forward cabin, since in that place they would have a better chance to give him his food, and he could go into the standing-room after all the others were in bed.

This change was gladly accepted by the disconsolate pirate, and he hastened to stow himself away there as quickly as possible.

"You'll certain let me know when there's the littlest chance for me to get ashore, won't you?" he asked, imploringly, and Dare assured him with decided emphasis that he was quite as anxious to land him as he was to be landed.

When Captain Sammy stepped on board he looked around him for some evidences that preparations had been made for getting the steamer under way, but everything was as he had left it.

The crew bustled around lively enough as soon as he was there; but their idleness during his absence was something he could not understand, and Dare believed the little man had grown suspicious. He well knew that if the captain should seriously suspect that something was taking place on the steamer which was kept a secret from him, it would not take him long to discover everything, and then would come the tragedy he had been fearing.

It was not many minutes after this before Charley announced that he was ready, the anchor was weighed, and the *Pearl* steamed swiftly up the sluggish waters of the Caloosahatchee River.

Had the boys not been so troubled in their minds concerning Tommy, they would have enjoyed to the utmost the morning sail up the river, where the scenery was so beautiful and the animal life so abundant.

Alligators of all sizes were to be seen as far as the eye could reach; some floating on the surface of the water, more like logs of wood than living things; others lying on the banks, with their wicked-looking eyes bright and shining; and others in pursuit of game. Snake-birds, with their shrill cries, seemed everywhere among the mangrove, oak, mulberry, or gum trees; bitterns darted from branch to branch; kingfishers flew before the steamer, or sat watchful near the wa-

ter; and the banks of the river seemed teeming with birds of varied descriptions.

Tall plants, with large white, crimson, or purple blossoms, and beautiful flowers of many kinds, fringed the water's edge, while the banks were overhung with tangled masses of the densest tropical vegetation, beyond which rose forests of cabbage-palm, backed on the higher ground by tall pine-trees.

The water was so clear that the bottom of the river could be distinctly seen, and Captain Sammy, from his perch on the bow, pointed out sharks, devil-fish, saw-fish, jew-fish, sting-rays, whip-rays, and innumerable other specimens, of which the boys had never heard.

The scene was strangely beautiful; but when Dare would grow interested in anything he saw, the thought of Tommy, and what the result of his stowing himself away on the *Pearl* might be, would come to him, and all else would be forgotten or unnoticed.

It was after they had been about two hours on their journey that Bobby crept into the pilot-house, and, in a way intended to be secret, but which would instantly attract attention, whispered to Dare that Charley and Tommy had formed a plan which they wanted him to consent to.

It was that one of the boys should call Captain Sammy into the cabin, and there engage his at-

tention until the pirate could creep out on deck, jump into the tender, and row ashore. After he had made his escape into the woods some one could discover that the boat had gone adrift, and the steamer be put back for it.

In case Captain Sammy should discover the plot after Tommy had cast the boat loose from the steamer, and while he was yet in sight, Charley was to pretend to misunderstand the signals given, and thus the pirate would escape before the steamer could be stopped.

Dare did not like the plan, because of the deception that must be practised on the little man; but something must be done, even if it was desperate, and he told Bobby to go away for a while until he could think the matter over.

All this time Captain Sammy was leaning over the rail in a careless sort of way, as if he was paying no attention to what was taking place behind him; but, had any of the boys watched him carefully, they would have seen that he was on the alert for everything around him.

Dare realized that if they did not part company with the pirate very soon, they would be so far from any settlement as to make it impossible that he could ever reach home; therefore, much as he disliked Charley's plan, he concluded that it should be tried.

He made motions to Bobby to come into the pilot-house again, and there another whispered

consultation was held as to how Bobby should contrive to get the little man into the cabin and keep him there.

Then Bobby returned to Charley, telling him what Dare had said, and warning him to have Tommy all ready when Dare should give the signal by whistling through the speaking-tube.

Dare proposed to wait until they should come to a bend in the river before the plan was carried into execution, so that Tommy could be more sure of getting out of sight quickly, and in less than half an hour the *Pearl* approached what seemed to be the very place of all others in which to try the experiment.

Dare whistled to Charley, and was about to motion to Bobby to do his portion of the work, when Captain Sammy started to his feet as if he had received an electric shock.

"I don't like this!" he shouted, in what, to Dare, seemed a stern voice. "Tell Charley to stop her!"

It was with a sinking heart that Dare rang the bell, for he felt that the critical moment had come, and that in a very short time Captain Sammy would know all.