

CHAPTER XIX.

CAPTAIN SAMMY'S PERIL.

WHEN the little man gave the order to stop the *Pearl* he spoke in such a loud voice that every one on board heard him, and for a few moments confusion reigned in the engine-room. Of course, each one thought, as Dare had, that the pirate's presence was discovered, or would be in a very short time, and Tommy's knees trembled so that he could hardly manage to creep into his new hiding-place in the after-cabin.

It would have been a far less observing man than Captain Sammy who would not have seen the consternation and fear which was plainly written on the boys' faces when they came on deck after he had given the order for the steamer to be stopped, and it did not escape his watchful gaze.

But the cause of Captain Sammy's apparently singular action arose from a more innocent reason than the guilty boys believed. It is possible, however, that his suspicions that some mischief was on foot had been aroused, and he spoke in

this stern way to satisfy himself if he was correct in his surmises.

"I don't like this idea of rushing ahead as if everything depended on our getting to Lake Okechobee at a certain time," he said, when the boys stood before him, "and it is too bad not to take our share of these fish before we go any farther."

The faces of his listeners lightened up at once when they found that they had no cause for fear on Tommy's account, and if Captain Sammy was making an experiment, he must have been convinced that his suspicions were correct.

As soon as they learned that he wanted some fish the boys produced their lines and hooks with an alacrity which caused the little man to smile, for their haste to obey him was a proof that they had feared something from him.

It did not take the three boys—Captain Sammy not caring to try his luck—very long to catch all the fish, and even more, than they could possibly use, and when they drew in their lines they had as many black bass, bream, cat-fish, and perch as it was possible the hungriest crew could dispose of before they spoiled.

Captain Sammy surveyed the catch with a grim satisfaction, and while the boys were winding up their lines preparatory to starting on their journey again, he pointed out to them four quite large sharks which were lying motionless

near the surface of the water, as if they expected a portion of the spoils.

"Look at 'em," cried the little man, as he shook his fist in impotent wrath toward the members of the same family who had dined off of his leg. "You'll find folks so ignorant as to tell you that sharks won't come up a river, and here we are fully twelve miles from the bay. I tell you a shark will follow a boat for days, in hopes that somebody will be foolish enough to tumble overboard, and just as likely as not those fellows have followed us all the way from Tampa."

The boys could not repress a shudder as they gazed at the sinister-looking fish, and it was not difficult to believe that Captain Sammy had told the truth, and that they were following the steamer in the hope of making a meal of human flesh.

The view of the sharks was not a pleasant one, and when Captain Sammy called Bobby into the standing-room with him, to help clean the fish, Dare and Charley started the *Pearl* on again.

The farther up the river they proceeded the more numerous had the alligators become, until it required no small amount of skill on the part of the helmsman to prevent the little craft from running into the unwieldy creatures.

Once or twice the *Pearl* went so near to them as to rub against their scaly backs, and Captain Sammy, perched up on the rail at the extreme

stern of the boat, ordered Charley to tell Dare to "keep his eye peeled, or the steamer might get another hole knocked in her bow."

When the little man asked Bobby to come into the standing-room he stated that it was to *help* him clean the fish; but when the work began Bobby was the one who was obliged to do the greater portion of it, while Captain Sammy, from his elevated seat on the rail, gave his youthful assistant scientific lectures as to how the work should be done.

Dare now had little time for any thought of the incubus they had on board in the shape of the pirate, for it seemed almost as if the alligators were doing their best to strike the *Pearl* with their long, ugly snouts.

One seemed to have risen from the bottom of the river not a dozen feet from the bow of the steamer, and Dare was obliged to swing his wheel hard down to avoid him. As it was the little craft struck him about half-way from bow to midship, riding up on his scaly back in a way that caused her to careen until the starboard guard was even with the water.

Dare had tried to escape one danger without noticing whether he might not be running into another, and the consequence was that the steamer struck full upon one of the largest of the saurian monsters at the same time she careened so badly.

Dare had no thought for anything save the possible damage that might have been done to the boat, and therefore gave no heed to the cry which came from the stern. In fact, so alarmed was he lest they were in a sinking condition, that he could not tell afterward whether or no he heard any cry whatever.

But in a very few seconds he saw that the engine had been suddenly reversed, and then came the startling cry, both from Bobby and Charley,

“Captain Sammy’s overboard! Captain Sammy’s overboard!”

For an instant Dare let go the helm and rushed out of the pilot-house to see what could be done; but before he could get aft he realized that, with the engine still in motion, he, by deserting his post, was not doing anything toward saving Captain Sammy, but was actually retarding operations, by allowing the steamer to back around where she might ground, or work herself worse injury.

Grasping the spokes of the wheel firmly, as if by his strong hold he could also retain all his presence of mind, he looked astern for some signs of the man who was in such deadly peril.

The steamer had run ahead some distance after the blow had been struck which knocked the little man from his lofty perch, and now he could be seen fully fifty yards behind, while the re-

versing of the engine was taking the *Pearl* toward the bank of the river.

Captain Sammy was splashing around in the water and screaming loudly, evidently for the purpose of frightening away the sharks and alligators; but, owing to the fact of his having but one leg, it was with difficulty that he was keeping himself afloat.

Charley, Bobby, and even Tommy had by this time rushed into the bow, as if for Dare to tell them what to do, and he knew only too well that the saving of the little man's life depended almost wholly on him.

"Go back to your post," he shouted, sternly, to Charley, "and put on all steam ahead!"

It needed the stern command to arouse the engineer from his panic, and as Dare swung the wheel way around the laboring of the boat told that the order had been obeyed.

It was necessary to traverse nearly half of a circle before the apparently drowning man could be reached, and when Dare rang the bell to "stop her" he saw at a glance that Captain Sammy could do very little toward helping himself, lest, if he cease his exertions for a moment, either the sharks or the alligators would seize him.

Dare was completely at a loss to know what to do, and even as he hesitated he could see that Captain Sammy's struggles were growing fainter

and fainter. It was only too evident that he could not hold out many minutes longer.

Dare rushing for the tender, calling Charley to follow him, but he knew even in his excitement that they could not pull him in over the rail of that frail boat without upsetting her and endangering the lives of all.

The condition of his mind was little short of agony, and just when his fear was the most intense he was conscious that a form had darted past him and plunged into the water.

He could not prevent himself from screaming as he saw what seemed to be a leap to certain death, and he looked quickly around, to see whether it was his brother or his cousin who had gone there bravely to die.

But Charley and Bobby were both standing behind him, and he passed his hand over his eyes, as if he fancied he must have been deceived in what he thought he saw.

It was certain, however, that some one had jumped over, for a swimmer could be seen making directly for the nearly exhausted man and splashing in the water at a furious rate.

"Why, it's Tommy!" Dare cried, astonished that he had not thought of this one of their passengers before, and then all his faculties were restored to him again.

"Give the wheels a couple of turns!" he

shouted to Charley, as he picked up a heaving-line and ran to the bows.

The steamer was only about a dozen yards from the two who were struggling in the water against so many perils, and he hoped to be fortunate enough to run along-side them, when a rope could be flung around Captain Sammy.