

## CHAPTER XXI.

### IN THE TRACKLESS FOREST.

HE had aimed at one of the females, instead of at the buck, because she had chanced to be nearer to him; and, although she did not fall at once, he knew from her movements as she started away that his bullet had taken effect.

The herd were off at once, but the wounded one ran so unsteadily that Dare, believing she would drop almost immediately, raised a shout of triumph, and started after his game, closely followed by Tommy.

The trail was not difficult to follow, even for inexperienced hunters, for it was distinctly marked by the blood that fell from the wounded animal, and Dare's heart beat high at the thought that at last he had killed the game he so ardently desired to kill.

But the deer was not so near her death as he had thought, for they continued to follow, catching glimpses of the wounded animal, as, left far behind the others of the herd, she ran with increasing difficulty, until the sun had sunk almost below the tree-tops.

In the excitement of the chase they had not noticed the passage of time, and when at last they came to where the poor animal had fallen, never to rise again, they were surprised to find that it was so nearly dark that it was with difficulty they could see the game they had killed.

"We must hurry back to the *Pearl*," said Dare, as he looked about him with a troubled air, "for it won't be long before it will be too late for us to be able to tell where the west is."

It seemed as if it was immaterial to Tommy whether they could distinguish the points of the compass or not, and he answered "All right," much as if they only had the question of a five minutes' tramp before them.

Dare was so thoroughly anxious about their position that he did not even stop to try to skin his game, but commenced hurriedly to cut out one of the haunches, that they might at least have proof of what they had killed.

Inexperienced as he was, and with only a small-sized hunting-knife to work with, it was no slight task to cut out the meat he wanted to carry; and when the job was finished the darkness—which, in tropical countries, succeeds the light so quickly—had formed an impenetrable veil around the amateur hunters.

During the operation of cutting out the haunch Dare had turned the deer several times, and had changed his own position so often, that when he

was ready to start again he had no more idea of which direction he should go in order to find the *Pearl* than if he had been led there blindfolded.

Not wanting Tommy to know that he was so utterly confused, he called to him to follow, and started off at hap-hazard, stumbling over trunks of fallen trees, and tripped up by the running vines, until it seemed worse than folly for them to continue on their blind course any longer.

"Tommy," said Dare, solemnly, as he stopped and took one of his companion's hands in his, "we're lost!"

"I know that," was the laconic reply from the ex-pirate, and he appeared perfectly indifferent about the matter.

"But what shall we do?" asked Dare, irritated by the calm manner in which his companion spoke.

"Get up in a tree, an' wait till morning," replied Tommy, philosophically.

The ex-pirate's advice was not only good, but it seemed as if it was the only thing that could be done; and, without being able to see toward what new peril they were going, they began to climb the nearest tree.

With their guns slung to their backs the boys tried to get themselves into something approaching a comfortable position on the crotch of the limb.

But it is hardly possible to make one's self comfortable on the branch of a tree when it is a question of remaining all night, and the hours that intervened before daylight seemed the longest that Dare had ever known, although it is possible that Tommy had had some experience in dreary hours when he was hiding from Captain Sammy in the cabin of the *Pearl*.

Whenever sleep did visit their eyelids it was only for a few moments, and then they would awake with a start as they found themselves slipping from their perch.

In a state of continual awakenings, intermingled with the greatest desire to sleep, the time passed, and daylight came quite as suddenly as it had disappeared.

The first thing Dare did, when it was light enough for them to pursue their journey again, was to fire off his gun several times, that the report might serve as signal in case their companions were anywhere near them.

The first thing Tommy did was to build a fire and cook some slices of their venison, for they both felt nearly famished.

The breakfast of hot meat gave them renewed courage, and they started out almost thoroughly invigorated.

They had walked nearly an hour without seeing any indications that they were on the right course, when Tommy, who was in advance, ut-

tered a cry of joy, and rushed toward a flat stone, at which he gazed intently.

"Here's a feller what'll show us our way," he cried, as he pointed to what looked more like the skeleton of an insect than anything else. "You wait a minute, and he'll stand up and point right to where the *Pearl* is."

Dare had heard, since he had been in Florida, of an insect called "the spectre," which superstitious people believed would point out the way to travellers lost in the forest, and, without believing that they possessed any such power, he examined the creature with much interest.

Tommy, sincere in the belief that the spectre would point out the right direction for them to take, asked very solemnly if it would tell them the way they ought to go, and then he waited patiently for an answer.

It was not many moments before the insect partly raised its body, and waved its fore-legs to and fro, as if really answering Tommy's question.

The ex-pirate started off at once in the direction pointed out; but Dare, who remained a moment longer, saw the spectre seize a fly in its feet, killing it instantly. It had waved its legs for the purpose of enticing the fly, rather than to show Tommy the way, although no amount of reasoning could convince the boy of that fact.

Fortunately, the insect had pointed directly in the course the boys had been pursuing, so that

there was no need of any discussion as to whether they should follow its directions or not.

It was nearly noon before Tommy lost faith in the spectre's power, and then there was good reason for it, since they had walked steadily without finding even a stream which might give them a course for the lake.

They had suffered from the lack of water; but this suffering had not been severe, since they had found pools of brackish water now and then, which they drank as eagerly as though it had sparkled like crystal.

They were now as hungry as they had been in the morning, and Dare proposed that they should cook more of the haunch of venison, to which Tommy had clung pertinaciously. But it was only necessary to attempt to cut it in order to find that it was no longer fit for food, the heat having thoroughly spoiled it.

"We must shoot the first thing we see, for we shall never get out of this if we don't keep ourselves strong by plenty of food," said Dare; and Tommy promised to obey, which promise came very near being fatal to both of them.

The ex-pirate was in advance, and, in less than ten minutes from the time he had promised to shoot the first object that presented itself, Dare saw him raise his gun to his shoulder.

It was impossible to see what kind of game the boy was aiming at, but Dare waited silent and

motionless, hoping that the result of his shot might be a good dinner for both.

The instant the report of the rifle died away Dare heard a loud snarl, and a rustling of the bushes a short distance ahead, as if some very large animal had been wounded.

At the same time Tommy sprang back and began to reload his gun.

"What was it?" asked Dare, beginning to grow alarmed, as the noise in the bushes increased.

"A panther," replied Tommy, in much the same tone he would have used if he had said "A bird," and then he added, quite calmly, "I fired 'cause you said I must at the first thing I saw; but you'd better look out, for he ain't dead yet."

It seemed an aggravation of their misery to be obliged to fight a panther when they were exhausted from the long tramp and lack of food; but there was no way out of it, and Dare peered cautiously around, in order to be prepared for any move the wounded animal might make.

It was hardly a moment before he saw the panther, as, reared on its hind-legs, it seemed to be coming directly toward them, and not more than ten yards away.