

CHAPTER XXII.

OUT OF THE WILDERNESS.

IT was anything rather than a pleasant or even safe position in which the boys found themselves, with a wounded panther advancing directly toward them, and they with no weapons other than two muzzle-loading rifles.

But there was only one way in which they could hope to extricate themselves, and that was by continuing the attack which Tommy had so rashly begun.

Reared on its hind-legs as it was, the animal presented a fair mark at short range, and Dare fired at him quickly, certain that he hit him full in the breast, but without causing any change in his movements.

Tommy, who had taken refuge behind a tree, where he loaded his gun with all the coolness and precision of an old hunter, was ready to take up his portion of the thread of the difficulty, and he also sent a bullet with apparently as true an aim as Dare's.

At receiving this shot the furious animal was brought to the ground, where he gave such evi-

dences of strength as warned the hunters that there was plenty of fight left in him despite his wounds.

Dare followed Tommy's example of loading while behind a tree, and two heavy charges were put into the guns. The monster was still writhing on the ground; and the boys, stepping cautiously up to within ten or twelve feet of the brute, sent two bullets crashing into his skull, which had the effect of killing him instantly.

It was a short but hard battle, well fought, and the boys stood viewing the evidence of their skill as marksmen, without a thought of the fact that they were lost in the forest, when suddenly a familiar sound greeted their ears, causing them to shout for very joy.

It was the whistle of the *Pearl*, and could not have been more than half a mile away.

"They must have heard us while we were firing at the panther," said Dare, joyfully; "but we will fire once more, to make sure."

The guns were loaded with powder, and both discharged at the same time. Then came three short whistles, showing that the signal had been heard, and after that prolonged whistling at regular intervals, so that the lost ones would have no difficulty in retracing their steps.

Dare was anxious to carry the skin of the panther with him as a trophy, and he insisted on

skinning the carcass before starting again to re-join their friends.

The hide was not taken off in a remarkably workman-like manner, but it was off, at all events; and then came a hurried march over fallen trees, among climbing, clinging vines, wherein lurked poisonous reptiles, until at last the waters of the lake could be seen from among the trees.

The little steamer had never looked half so beautiful as when Dare and Tommy stepped out on the hard beach, where they could see her, a short distance from the shore, while Charley and Bobby were just putting off in the tender.

Five minutes later and they were in their floating home once more, trying to eat as many as three meals in one and tell their story at the same time.

They learned that when night came and they had not returned Captain Sammy had ordered steam gotten up, and had cruised along the shore of the lake until midnight, sounding the whistle at intervals of about three minutes. After that time the *Pearl* came to an anchor; Charley and Bobby went to bed, while the little man remained awake all the night long, in order to keep the whistle going.

At daybreak the steamer was gotten under way again, and had been cruising along the shore all the forenoon, until the reports of the guns

were heard when the boys were battling with the panther.

"It won't do to try any more such hunting adventures, lads, for you might not get off so easily next time, and I don't propose to leave any of you here in the Everglades," said Captain Sammy, in as stern a voice as possible; but his joy at their safe return was too great to admit of his speaking as gruffly as he could sometimes.

The *Pearl* was run back to her former anchorage, and, after everything was made snug for the second time, Captain Sammy said,

"Tommy, there's a cabbage-palm right over there. Can't you climb it?"

"Of course I can," replied the ex-pirate, in disdain that there should be any question about his ability to do such a simple thing.

"All right; here's my belt and knife, and if the boys will row you ashore we'll show them what a cabbage that is raised on a tree tastes like."

The boys were only too willing to do as the little man had hinted they should, for they were anxious both to see a cabbage-palm and how a leathern belt and a sheath-knife could be used in climbing a tree.

After they were on shore, and Tommy had started in the direction Captain Sammy had pointed, the boys could see the famous cabbage-palm, as it reared its graceful head above the surrounding trees. Fully ninety feet the trunk

rose straight as a reed, with not a branch to mar its tapering symmetry, and the top was one immense mass of dark-green, fan-shaped leaves.

It was in the centre of these leaves where the cabbage—which is really a young, tender shoot—would be found, protected by numerous fibres or folds, and Tommy set about his task of getting it with the greatest unconcern.

The belt he buckled around the trunk of the tree and his own body, and, by holding on with his knees while he shoved the belt farther up on the trunk, he was enabled to make reasonably rapid progress, at the same time teaching his companions a lesson in tree-climbing.

On reaching the top Tommy cut off some of the large leaves, which would make an excellent camp on shore, and then cut the cabbage from its secure and cosy home.

Captain Sammy was as delighted with the prize when it was brought to him as if he had received one of the veritable vegetables from which the tree takes its name; but when it was cooked that night the boys could not detect very much of a cabbage flavor. Dare thought it was more like a boiled chestnut in taste, and the others were of his opinion—all save Captain Sammy, who would insist that the flavor was that of a cabbage and nothing more.

The little man showed them how to tan the skin of the panther, and Tommy and Dare

worked at it, while Charley and Bobby went on shore to shoot some sand-cranes, coming back with two fine specimens, which Captain Sammy promised to stuff for them.

This offer raised the greatest enthusiasm on the subject of stuffed birds among the boys; and the little captain found that if he granted all the requests he should have work enough on hand to keep him busy about two months; therefore he proposed to teach the art of taxidermy to them, so that they might carry with them a goodly collection of specimens from the Everglades.

This offer was eagerly accepted by Dare and Charley, and for the next ten days little was done save stuffing and mounting the birds which Tommy and Bobby brought in, and the greater portion of the work was really creditable to the young taxidermists.

When every available inch of space in both cabins was filled with birds of gorgeous plumage or grotesque shapes, Captain Sammy proposed that they should start the idle engines once more, and make a complete tour of the lake, which proposition was accepted without a dissenting voice.