

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE EVERGLADES.

IT was at an early hour on the morning after the tour of the lake had been decided upon that the *Pearl* left her anchorage and sailed to the southeast along the shore—or, at least, the geographical boundary—of the lake. It is necessary to speak of the shore only in a technical sense; for the greater portion of the distance the border of the lake was marked only by tufts of grass or small patches of land, looking like little islands.

This marsh, or submerged meadow, was really the lake shore, over which the water had flowed into what a writer poetically terms “that vast, island-studded lake, the Everglades.”

Captain Sammy talked during that first day of the voyage of discovery as if he had some stout internal spring which prevented his jaws from closing; but as all he said was entertaining and instructive, the boys would not have stopped him had they been able to do so. He pointed out among the trees palmettos, oaks, cocoa-trees, crab-wood, mastic, and cypress; and among the

birds very many varieties which they had not secured.

It was during their first night's halt that Captain Sammy said, as he armed himself with his formidable spectacles and a book,

"I did think when we struck in here that we could take a tramp inland, but the water is so high that you will have to get the information your father insisted you should have from this book," and he handed them Professor Agassiz's "Methods of Study in Natural History."

"Now, this book will tell you that what is called the Everglades consists of seven parallel lines of hummocks, each of which have formed in turn the Florida reefs. After they were reefs they became keys, and then mainland, and some do go so far as to say that the whole point of this State was built by them little polyps I was telling you about."

The boys had been trying to resign themselves, in a sleepy way, to what they supposed was a long lecture on the formation of that portion of the State; but when Captain Sammy ended thus abruptly, and then handed the book to Dare, that they might study it at their leisure, their relief was as great as their surprise.

Dare had but one question to ask, and the subject of it had troubled him considerably at the time he and Tommy were lost in the forest:

"Are there any Indians around here, Captain Sammy?"

"None of any account, my lad. Time has been when they had their own way down here, an', for the matter of that, pretty much all over the State; but there's only about a couple of hundred left now, and they don't show themselves very often."

Before the *Pearl* was gotten under way the next morning Captain Sammy gave Tommy a suit of clothes he had been making out of some old ones of his. It was a full sailor rig, cut man-of-war fashion, and the ex-pirate looked as nice and trim in them as if he had been fitted out by the most expert tailor in the country.

The trip around the lake was not nearly as exciting or interesting as they had fancied it would be, save now and then when they landed to get some new specimen of bird to add to their collection, and all hands were beginning to weary of what was becoming monotonous, when Captain Sammy came to the rescue.

"We'll come to another early this afternoon, and see if we can't fix the tender up for a night's fishing."

Tommy nodded his head approvingly, for he knew what was meant by fishing by night; but the others looked at the captain in surprise, for they had not supposed the fish would bite at night, and Dare told Captain Sammy as much.

"I don't suppose the fish would bite," said the little man, "and that don't make any difference, for, you see, this time we will bite the fish," and then he chuckled over what he evidently thought was a very good joke, until the boys began to fear he would choke.

With some pieces of stout wire the little man made what looked like grates, such as are used in open coal stoves, and when these were done he and Tommy went on shore, returning with a quantity of pine-knots.

Four short spears with barbs on them were put into the tender, the grates were hung on either side, and Captain Sammy's arrangements were complete.

It was easy now to understand what he had meant by "biting the fish."

The *Pearl* was brought to an anchor about three o'clock in the afternoon; the fires were allowed to go out, in order to save coal; and all hands waited for the night to come.

The evening proved to be a good one for the sport, for there was no moon, and the stars were partially obscured by clouds.

"We couldn't have had a better time for the sport if we'd been waiting round here for a month," said Captain Sammy, approvingly, as he gave the order for the boat to be hauled up alongside. "Before long I'll show you lads something that you can tell about when you get home."

The boys thought that they had considerable of that sort of material already stowed away, but they were eager for anything novel, and they lost no time in getting on board the tender.

Captain Sammy assigned to each of them a place in which to sit, for the little craft was uncomfortably crowded with so many, and he ordered Tommy to the duty of attending to the fires.

Each of the others had a spear, while Dare and Charley had an oar, their task being to row to such a place as the little man thought best suited to the sport.

Tommy had provided himself with some bits of tarred rope and paper, and by the time Captain Sammy had given the order to stop rowing he had the fires burning fiercely in the grates, with pieces of sheet-iron over the boat's side, to protect the wood-work from the flames.

"Now look down at the fish!" exclaimed Tommy, in delight; and the boys peered down over the sides of the boat.

Great was their surprise to find that they could see through the water so distinctly as to perceive even the smallest pebble on the bottom, and fish of all sizes were darting in every direction.

"Pole her along with the boat-hook, Tommy," said Captain Sammy, and then he gave the others an example of how the fish were to be

caught, by spearing and hauling on board a large-sized one.

Tommy poled the boat gently along, at the same time keeping the fire burning brightly, while all hands engaged in the exciting sport, capturing some that required all their strength to land in the boat.

Even Captain Sammy grew so excited in the sport that he failed to notice that the wind, and not Tommy, was urging the boat along, while the sky was completely overcast by the large, dark clouds that seemed hurrying along for the purpose of starting a storm.

"You'll have to stop now, for that's the last of the wood," said Tommy, as he threw a large pine-knot on the fire; and as he said this Captain Sammy started up in something very like alarm.

Hurriedly he gazed around, noticing for the first time the signs of the coming storm, and the means by which the boat had been propelled.

A dense darkness shut out everything beyond the circle of light from view, and it was impossible to see any signs of the little steamer.

For two or three minutes Captain Sammy stood erect and silent, mentally scolding at his stupidity in not hoisting the signal-lantern before leaving the steamer, and then he seated himself in the stern again with the air of one who, knowing he has committed a grievous error,

resolves to take desperate measure to repair the wrong done.

"Take up your oars and pull as hard as you can," he said to Dare and Charley, and speaking as if he was simply in a hurry to get back to the *Pearl*. "Keep your fires ablaze as long as you can, Tommy," he added, "and if you haven't got wood enough use one of the thwarts."

But it was more difficult to return than even the little man had imagined. Urged along only by the wind as they had been, the increasing roughness of the water had not been noticed. Now, as Captain Sammy steered her right in the teeth of the wind, for that was all he had to guide him in his course, the little boat danced and rocked on the waves, while every now and then one would break over the gunwale, owing to her heavy load.

"Throw those fish overboard," said Captain Sammy to Bobby, who sat nearest him.

"All of them?" asked Bobby, in surprise, not willing to lose such a fine cargo.

"You may keep two; but put the others out as quick as you can. Tommy, bear a hand on that bow oar with Charley and wake her up!"

Tommy, as fireman, had become useless, since the waves had fought his fire from the time the start homeward was made; and just before Captain Sammy spoke they had quenched the flames

in both grates, coming in over the bow in no small quantity at the same time.

The darkness was now so intense that the old sailor could not see more than three boat-lengths ahead, and he knew, even though he was hardly willing to admit it to himself, that their chances for reaching the *Pearl* that night were well-nigh hopeless.