

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### LOST ON LAKE OKECHOBEE.

THERE was no word spoken by those on the boat save now and then as Captain Sammy uttered an order in a sharp, quick tone, that told quite as plainly as did the surroundings the peril in which they were placed.

Bobby was kept bailing steadily, and even then the water would have increased faster than it could have been disposed of if the little captain had not assisted from time to time.

The wind was fast increasing in violence, until the waves in that inland sea appeared almost as high as on the ocean, and all the skill of the helmsman could not prevent them from breaking over the frail craft every few moments.

The boys labored manfully at the oars, but much of their strength was spent in vain, owing to the fact that at least half of the time the oaken blades were too high out of the water, or too deep in, because of the violence and height of the waves.

For nearly an hour this useless struggle was continued, and nothing had been seen of the

Pearl. Owing to the fact that he had no means of directing his course it was very probable that they were headed in any other than the right direction, and Captain Sammy also knew very well that they might have run within a dozen yards of her without being aware of the fact.

It had begun to rain, and, if the gale continued to increase, as indeed it promised to, the little boat could not ride another hour.

Captain Sammy would have put about and let the wind drive them on to the shore some time before he did, if it had not been for the danger that would attend the turning of the boat; their only safety had been to keep her right in the teeth of the wind, but now that it was certain that they would be swamped very soon as they were going, the little man decided that the attempt must be made.

It was the only chance to save their lives, and he gave the order to cease rowing.

"I am going to try to get her around," he shouted, "so be ready with your oars the instant I give the word."

Not one of the boys there, with the possible exception of Bobby, was ignorant of the danger attending this attempt, and they knew that their lives depended upon the promptness with which they obeyed the orders.

For a few moments the wind forced the little

craft directly backward, and then, as her bow rose on the wave, it swung her around, flinging her down into the chasm of waters sideways.

"Pull, Charley! Back water, Dare!" cried Captain Sammy, sharply, knowing only too well that, if she was not turned while in the trough of the sea, she would almost certainly be swamped as she rose on the next wave, and at the same time he leaned over, helping Dare with his oar.

The manœuvre was successful, but it was not accomplished a second too soon, since almost the instant it was done the little craft came up on the crest of the wave and the wind howled around around them in a gust that was almost like a hurricane.

"Now row just enough to keep steerage-way on, and don't put out too much strength," said the little man, as he devoted all his attention to keeping the boat full before the wind.

There was nothing more that could be done, and the party waited in terrible suspense for the shock which should tell them they had reached the land while the little craft scudded before the gale as if she had a sail set.

Of course Captain Sammy knew that if they should strike the shore of the lake where there was a hard beach the boat would be stove, but against such an accident he could take no precautions, and it was far better to wreck their

boat where they could gain the land than try to save the craft and be swamped.

The rain seemed to descend in torrents, and Tommy was obliged to help Bobby in his work of bailing, or they might have been swamped by the weight of rain-water that poured into her.

"Of course you know that we're running for the shore?" said Captain Sammy, after they had dashed along in silence for some time, "and when we strike it will be with great force, so keep yourself prepared for it. After the first shock tells that she is fast, make for the land if you can see it; if not, stand by the boat until I've made the attempt."

From that time for fully an hour—and in their suspense it seemed as though it must be nearly morning—the party waited for the boat to strike the beach, all knowing only too well that, if they chanced to come upon some one of the tiny islands instead of the shore, there was every danger of their being washed entirely over it.

When at last the shock did come every one, save Captain Sammy, was hurled from his seat, and it was impossible to distinguish anything which told that they were near the land.

The boat's bow was stove in such a way that she filled with water almost immediately, and it was as if they had been thrown into the lake.

Captain Sammy was about to leap over the side, to attempt to make his way to the land, if

indeed they were on the shore of the lake, when Tommy scrambled toward him and said, almost imploringly,

"I can swim better than you can, an' it won't make so much difference if I should be drowned, so let me go first;" and then, without waiting for an answer, he plunged over the side, being immediately lost to view.

It would have been useless for Tommy to have waited for a reply, for Captain Sammy made none; it seemed as if it was impossible for him to speak; and when he passed his hand over his eyes it was not all fresh water that he wiped away.

Clinging to the sides of their shattered boat, the party waited for some sound which should come from Tommy, telling that he had gained the shore in safety, or for the long silence which would proclaim the horrible fact that he had lost his life in trying to save others.

The waves were making a clean sweep over them, and it seemed as if each minute of that waiting was fully an hour long.

Then Dare fancied he could hear some one calling, and, as he raised himself up to listen, he saw Tommy close beside him, the wind causing his voice to sound as if he was a long distance away.

"We are on a good hard beach," he shouted, "and all you'll have to do is to wade ashore."

At this news, which told that they had been waiting in dread within twenty feet of the mainland, the boys jumped out, and Captain Sammy ordered them to drag the wreck of the boat up with them, that the surf might not entirely destroy her.

On the beach it was no more possible to distinguish objects than when they had been on the water, but Captain Sammy led the way straight ahead, that they might gain some shelter from the storm in the woods.

But the gale was so furious that it was impossible to find any shelter deserving of the name, and as they stood beside the enormous trees, which bent before the storm like reeds, they had even a better idea of the force of the wind than when they were scudding before it on the lake.

While they were standing there, and before they had done anything toward trying to better their condition, Captain Sammy bethought himself of another and still more serious trouble which might have befallen them.

"You let go the anchor to-night, Tommy, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Which one did you use?"

"The smallest one; it had been used the night before, and so I let it go to-night."

"Then there is every chance that the *Pearl* is a greater wreck by this time than the boat is,"

said Captain Sammy, solemnly; "for it doesn't seem possible that one anchor, even if it had been the heavy one, could hold her against this gale."

There was no reply made to this ominous suggestion. Each one of the party knew of the dangers and privations which would be theirs, even though they did succeed in getting out of the Everglades, in case the *Pearl* had been wrecked, and to their present misery was added the horrible fear that they were, in truth, hopelessly wrecked on the shores of that inland sea.

Their two days' voyage of discovery had taken them just as much farther from the Caloosahatchee River, down which they must go to the coast, and they were that distance farther in the Everglades, through which it might be impossible to make their way on foot.

Their situation was a desperate one, whether the *Pearl* was safe or not; and they were far from bettering it by standing there in the storm thinking of the dreadful fate the future might have in store for them.

"Come," said the little man, who was the first to arouse from the stupor of dread and fear into which all had fallen, "standing here shivering won't mend matters, and what we've got to do is to try to get up some kind of a shelter, or we shall all be dissolved before morning."

He had tried to speak in a cheery tone, and it had a good effect, for the boys began to move around, which was far better than standing idle, even if they could not better their condition.