

CHAPTER XXV.

SUNSHINE AFTER THE STORM

THE darkness was so intense that it was only by feeling their way among the trees that the shipwrecked party on the shores of Lake Okechobee could manage to move along, and then it was, of course, impossible to do anything toward erecting a shelter.

Captain Sammy had aroused them from the despair which had begun to creep over them, and that was all he cared to do, for he knew very well that it would have been impossible for them to put up so much of a shelter as would have shielded a cat from the storm, owing first to the darkness, and next to the wind, which would have torn away anything in the form of a camp as fast as it could have been put up.

After the boys had learned how useless it was to try to make a shelter, and were settling down into discomfort again, the little man started them out along the beach, under the pretence that they might be able to discover some traces of the *Pearl*.

In this manner, urged on from one useless exertion to the other, the night passed. At about the time for the sun to rise the rain ceased to fall, the clouds dispersed, and when the orb of day came up on the eastern sky the heavens were clear and bright for his journey across them.

With the first light of dawn each one of the party gazed anxiously around the shores of the lake, but as far as they could see there were no signs of the little steamer.

"Look for wreckage on the shore," cried Captain Sammy, eagerly, as from mere force of habit he shaded his eyes with his hands from the light which was hardly strong enough to permit of their seeing the shore on either side of them.

But no such ominous signs were in sight, and there was still hope that the little craft was yet afloat.

They had been thrown ashore where the smooth, hard beach extended for nearly half a mile, and to the left was a point of land around which it was possible the *Pearl* might be in view.

"Bobby, you run over to that point and see if the steamer is in sight from there, while the rest of us try what we can do toward patching up the tender," said Captain Sammy; "for we shall want her, whatever has happened to the *Pearl*."

Then, if it should be that the little steamer is afloat, we must have the tender to get out to her in."

Bobby started off at full speed, while the others examined the boat that had been hauled up on the beach. Her bow was stove past all hope of mending properly, but Captain Sammy believed he could fix her so that a short trip might be made in her.

One of the oars and the rudder were gone, while the forward seat had fallen before the flames Tommy had tried to keep burning the night before.

But, fortunately for the party, the two fish that Bobby had saved when he threw the others overboard were still there. They had gotten wedged in under the stern-seat, and thus was the breakfast provided for the party who otherwise would have gone hungry.

"Now, Dare, you see if you can't cook these fish, and Tommy take the bailing-dipper and go for some gum."

No one save he who had spoken and he who was spoken to understood what kind of gum was desired, or what it was wanted for; but Tommy took the dipper and trudged off into the woods as unconcerned as ever.

It was not as simple a matter to cook the fish as at first appeared, owing to the difficulty of kindling a fire, for each one of the party had been

thoroughly drenched the night previous, and, of course, the matches had shared the same fate.

But Captain Sammy was equal to this emergency, as he had been to many others since the cruise commenced. After ordering Dare to find some wood which the heat of the morning sun had already dried, and have everything ready for the fire, Captain Sammy laid the wet matches on a rock in the sunlight. Around them he piled such dry material as he could readily find, and then, with the glasses from his and Dare's watch, he made such a sun-glass as speedily ignited the matches, as well as the lighter portion of the wood.

"There's your fire," he said; "now get breakfast."

By this time Bobby, who had for a while disappeared around the point, came into view, running at the top of his speed, and while he was yet a long distance away those on the beach could hear him shout,

"The *Pearl's* all right! The *Pearl's* all right!"

Then, when he was nearer, he told them that, almost as far ahead as he could distinguish objects, he could see the steamer riding at anchor, and apparently uninjured.

Captain Sammy's face expressed the thankfulness he felt at thus knowing that their situation was simply one of uncomfortableness, and not

actual danger, while his feelings were shared in a greater or less degree by all the others.

Now, as the fish began to splutter and hiss at being impaled on sharp sticks in front of such a hot fire, all hands began to feel very hungry, and Bobby and Charley tried to hurry the breakfast-time along by piling the fire high with wood—an operation which only served to sprinkle the fish more plentifully with ashes and cinders.

Some time before this not particularly nice breakfast was ready Tommy returned, with his dipper nearly full of gum; and when questioned by Charley as to what it was and where he got it, he replied that it was a substance which exuded from the gum-trees, and that he had been obliged to visit several to get that quantity, because, owing to the rain-storm, it did not flow as freely as it would after three or four days of dry, hot weather.

“Captain Sammy’s goin’ to try to patch up the boat with it,” he added; and the little man’s actions now showed that Tommy had told the truth.

He had taken off his flannel shirt and torn it into strips, which he forced into the seams of the boat that had opened with the point of his knife. When the gum was handed to him he looked at it critically, told Tommy to put it on the fire, and went on with his work.

The ex-pirate knew all about boiling gum

down to use instead of tar, and he stirred the mixture carefully until fully two-thirds had boiled away, leaving a thick, dark material almost like melted glue.

Breakfast was ready before Captain Sammy had finished caulking the boat with the flannel, and all hands partook of it as best they could with neither plates, knives, or forks; but no one made a remarkably hearty meal, owing to the exceeding freshness of the food.

After the rather unsatisfactory meal was ended Tommy proposed to the captain that he should go opposite to where the *Pearl* was lying, swim out to her, and try to work her in toward the shore, in order to do away with the necessity of spending so much labor on a useless boat.

Captain Sammy looked up at him a moment as if to assure himself that he was really in earnest, and then said, as he pointed to an alligator that was swimming by just then,

"How far do you suppose those fellows would let you swim?"

"Oh, I'll risk but that I could get out to the steamer before they could get hold of me," laughed Tommy.

"But I don't propose to have you risk it," said the captain, in a tone that showed he considered all argument was at an end. "I'm about done now, all but putting the gum on. As soon as I spread that you take the dipper and fill it again,

while the other boys are walking as far toward the *Pearl* as they can go on the shore. Then you boil the gum down, and follow them. I'll go in the boat; and I don't want to carry any more of a load than I can help, for she isn't over and above strong."

Captain Sammy spread a thick coating over the seams, and while it was hardening Tommy started off gum-gathering again, while the other boys went down the beach in the direction of the steamer.

When at last Captain Sammy had repaired the boat as well as was possible under the circumstances, and Tommy was obliged to fill the dipper twice more before he had finished, she was very nearly water-tight. There were two or three small leaks, but it would be impossible for any more than water enough to wet their feet to come in during the short voyage they would be obliged to take.

"Now run on and join the other boys, Tommy, an' I'll pick you up when you come to the end of the beach," said Captain Sammy, as he got into the boat, using the solitary oar to scull with.

Tommy started off, and when he reached the others at a point where the beach merged into swampy land he found that they were hardly more than a half mile from the steamer.

When Captain Sammy came up he took Dare

and Tommy in the boat, and, after they reached the *Pearl*, sent Tommy back for the other two.

When the party were once more on the steamer they found, to their great satisfaction, that she had suffered but little damage from the storm. Some of the lighter articles that had been on deck, including two birds Dare had just finished mounting, had been either blown or washed overboard, and considerable water had been shipped.

The little craft had swung around and overridden her anchor-chain in such a way as to chafe her side; but everything could be set to rights in a short time, and it is safe to say that a more thankful party never gathered on Lake Okechobee than was this, when the inspection was finished.