

CHAPTER XXVI.

HOMeward BOUND.

WITHIN two hours after the shipwrecked party were on the *Pearl* all the mischief wrought by the storm had been repaired, save in the case of the tender, and she could not be made thoroughly serviceable again until the proper tools and material could be procured.

When Captain Sammy had patched her up with gum and flannel it was only with the idea that she was to be used for taking them back to the *Pearl* again. He knew very well that she would not be serviceable for a longer time than that work would occupy; and when, everything else being done, the little tender was pulled on board the *Pearl*, it did not require a very careful examination to see that it would not be safe to venture in her again.

"We can't land again, boys, unless at some place where we can run the steamer right up to the bank, for it would be worse than foolhardy to attempt to get any distance in this boat, especially with so many alligators around."

The boys were rather disappointed when they

realized that their hunting trips were over; but they did not understand that the loss of that pleasure was not all that the wrecking of the boat meant, until Captain Sammy said,

"And if you can't go on shore we shall be sadly put to it for provisions. We shall be obliged to eat fish three times a day, and I reckon you'll get rather tired of that kind of a diet before long."

"But what can we do?" asked Dare; and it was evident from his reply that Captain Sammy had been leading the conversation up to the point where such a question would naturally be asked, for he replied, quickly,

"I'll tell you what I think we'd better do, and then you can decide matters to please yourselves, for I'm willing to go or stay, just as you say. It's settled that we can't land here, unless we keep steam up all the time, and that we can hardly do, on account of coal. Now, it will get lonesome after you've been shut up on the boat a few days, so I propose that you go on shore for a grand hunting excursion to-morrow, and that we lay still the next day, of course, for it is Sunday. On Monday we will start for the sponge-fisheries, where some of my vessels are, and from there go home. In Tampa we can get our boat fixed, fit out anew, and then start for the Florida reefs. What do you say?"

Since returning to Tampa did not mean giving up the cruise, but simply making two instalments

of it, the boys readily agreed to the little man's plan, and began overhauling and cleaning their guns preparatory to the next day's hunt.

Some fishing was done over the rail that afternoon, not for the sake of sport, but that they might have food; and when the party went to bed at night there was not one among them who felt sorry they were so soon to leave the Everglades.

On the following morning there was a light breeze setting toward the land, and Captain Sammy concluded to allow the little craft to drift in to the shore, rather than go to the trouble of getting up steam; but he took very good care to let go the anchor some distance from the shore, paying out the cable till her bow struck the beach, so that she could be hauled out to a safer anchorage at night.

His orders to the sailors-turned-hunters were, that they should not go into the woods more than a quarter of a mile at the farthest, and that under no circumstances were they to follow any wounded animal more than a hundred yards.

Not being particularly in search of large game, the boys were perfectly willing to obey the commands which were given with a view to their own safety; and their hunting that day was chiefly directed to getting more specimens of the feathered tribes to add to their already rather large collection.

But Dare was careful to see that their larder was provided for, and he bagged quite as much as could be eaten before it would spoil, after which he joined the others in their search for rare birds.

During the entire day the hunting match was kept up, the boys going on board the steamer once or twice for the purpose of carrying their game, or of getting something to eat; and when night came they were quite tired enough to go to sleep as soon as they had rolled into their berths.

The next day, which was Sunday, was spent quietly on the steamer, Captain Sammy talking to them in a way which was as impressive as any sermon they had ever heard.

Bright and early Monday morning Charley was up and in the engine-room, and by seven o'clock the paddles of the *Pearl* began to revolve as she started on the homeward trip.

Down through the narrow stream leading from Lake Okechobee to Lake Kackpochee the steamer glided; and if the tender had been in condition to use the boys would have pleaded hard for one day on the smaller lake, so much more cheerful-looking did it seem than the vast body of water on which they had been so long.

The first day's journey ended about five o'clock in the afternoon, when the yacht came to an anchor a short distance below Fort Deynaud;

and after supper all hands went into the standing-room, as had come to be their custom at the close of each day.

After they had been there a short time Captain Sammy pulled out of his pocket a small piece of printed paper, which was very much crumpled and soiled.

"There," he said, as he handed it to Dare—"there is a piece about sponges that I cut out of an old book I found, an' I want you to read it aloud, so's you an' your messmates will know all about what they're goin' to see, an' won't be worrying the life out of me asking questions."

Dare took the printed slip in silence, for he had learned that it was better not to remonstrate with Captain Sammy, even when he appeared to be unjust, and read the article as he had been told to do, while the little man smoked and stroked his chin with evident satisfaction.

And this is what Dare read:

"The kinds of sponges that are fit for use are found in the seas of warm climates. Two species are brought from the Levant, and a very inferior one from the West Indies and coast of Florida. The trade in sponges is very considerable, and is carried on chiefly by the Turks and the inhabitants of the Bahama Islands. The number of men employed in the Ottoman sponge-fishery is between four and five thousand, forming the crews of about six hundred boats.

These boats find their chief employment on the coasts of Candia, Barbary, and Syria. Here the sponge is obtained by divers, who take down with them a flat piece of stone of triangular shape, with a hole drilled through one of its corners; to this a cord is attached, and the diver makes it serve to guide him to particular spots. When he reaches the growing sponges he tears them off the rocks and places them under his arms; he then pulls at the ropes, which is the signal for his companions in the boat to draw him up.

"The value of sponges collected in Greece and Turkey is from \$450,000 to \$500,000 annually. The Greeks of the Morea, instead of diving, obtain sponges by a pronged instrument; but the sponges thus collected are torn, and sell at a low price. The best sponges are obtained from detached heads of rocks, in eight or ten fathoms of water. The sponges from the Bahamas and the Florida coast are of a larger size and coarser quality. They are torn from the rocks by a fork, at the end of a long pole. To rid them of the animal matter they are buried for some days in the sand, and then soaked and washed."

"There," said Captain Sammy, when Dare had finished reading, "I could have told you all that just as well as for you to read it; but now you've got it just as it was writ down, an' if it

ain't right you can't be throwin' it in my teeth that I don't know nothing."

Then Captain Sammy relapsed into a moody silence, looking as if no amount of coaxing or persuasion could thaw him out, for fully ten minutes. At the end of that time he began to tell stories, only stopping when it was absolutely necessary that they should go to bed.