

CHAPTER XXVII.

RECKLESS STEERING.

IT had been announced by Captain Sammy, just before they had retired, that he was anxious to anchor in Charlotte harbor the next night, so that they could reach the sponge-fishers at an early hour Wednesday morning. It was necessary that he should have a long day with them, in order to finish his business by nightfall.

To do this they must begin their preparations for the start as soon as it was light enough to admit of their working.

It hardly seemed to the boys as if they had been in bed ten minutes when Captain Sammy called them next morning; but they got up, regardless of their desire for another nap, and the result of their early rising was that they swung around the point of Boca Grand Key just at sunset.

The yacht had been kept running at full speed all day, and, as a natural consequence, each one of the boys had been obliged to work so hard

that they had not the slightest desire to visit the picturesque little town on the key.

They retired at once, and started again at nearly as early an hour on the following morning, each one being anxious to see this strange fishery where a marine plant was the kind of fish sought for.

The sponge-fishers were employed not far from Tampa Bay; therefore when Captain Sammy had finished his business among them it would require only a few hours' run for the *Pearl* into Tampa.

Three hours after they had left Boca Grande, Captain Sammy pointed directly ahead to some low islands or keys, lying almost level with the water, and around which a number of vessels or boats could be seen.

"There are the sponge-fishers," he announced, "and in less than an hour we shall come to anchor among them."

The boys had fully expected to see a novel sight when once they were among the sponge-fishers, despite Tommy's assertion that there "wasn't much to be seen," and they were all excitement as they approached.

But when the *Pearl* was anchored in the very midst of the fleet of vessels, and nothing was to be seen more strange than a number of small boats, each containing from two to four men, all engaged in plunging long poles into the water,

and drawing them up, with a mass of sponge at the end, they were disposed to feel that they had been defrauded in some way.

It was really less novel and interesting to see these men than it was to see a party spearing eels, and after the boys had watched them for half an hour they had seen all they cared about.

Captain Sammy had been bustling around, making frantic signals with his hands, from the time the *Pearl* had first come to an anchor, and all his noise and fuss resulted in a spare boat being sent to them from a schooner of his called the *Bonita*.

The little man proposed to visit all the vessels lying there; those which he owned to see that the work was being conducted to suit him, and the others for the purpose of bargaining for the purchase of the sponge, the greater quantity of which was sold in Key West.

And it was not his intention to take any of his own men away from their work to row him around on his tour of inspection and purchase, for he said, in the most benevolent manner possible, and as though he were conferring some great favor,

"I'm going to let Bobby and Tommy row the boat, and Dare and Charley can stay here to keep ship."

Neither of the two boys selected had any very great desire to labor at the oars on an errand

which would be so uninteresting to them; but they were careful not to let Captain Sammy see that they looked upon it other than as the greatest favor.

After they had left the steamer *Dare* and Charley found it rather hard work to amuse themselves in a place where there was really so little to be seen. They watched the sharks as they glided around among the boats in search of prey, their dorsal fins visible above the water, looking sinister because of the very grace and swiftness of their movements.

After this they set to work catching fish, for the purpose of surprising Captain Sammy by having a chowder all ready for him when he should come on board for dinner, and they did succeed in surprising him, for neither he nor any one else could have told what the dark-looking mixture was simply by judging from its taste and appearance.

Captain Sammy really appeared to be grieved because the captain and engineer of the *Pearl* knew no more about cooking than was shown by this chowder, and he obliged them to watch all his movements while he cooked two ducks, giving them a long lecture on cooking, which was only finished when the dinner was.

"I'm goin' to take you in hand on the next cruise," he said, as he got into the boat again, "and by the time we've been the whole length

of the reef you will be able to get up almost as good a dinner as I can."

But he seemed to think they could wash dishes well enough, for he left the yacht without doing anything toward helping to clean up the little cook-room or the dining-table, and it was fully an hour, owing to their awkwardness, before Dare and Charley succeeded in doing it in anything like a proper manner.

After this work was done the boys lounged on the seats in the standing-room, wishing that Captain Sammy would return, so that they could get away from the very disagreeable odor caused by the decaying sponges, until the movements of an incoming schooner attracted their attention.

She evidently was one of the fleet of sponge-gatherers, but the singular manner in which she was handled caused great surprise to the boys, amateur sailors though they were.

It seemed as if the helmsman had no idea as to where he wanted to go or what he should do, for he steered his vessel in the wildest possible manner, and without the slightest regard to the direction of the wind. The craft would be headed directly for one of the anchored vessels, as if the only purpose was to run her down, and then she would come about, with sails flapping, blocks rattling, and men shouting, standing toward another vessel.

This singular behavior on the part of the crew

or captain of the schooner caused the greatest excitement among the other fishermen, and they shouted and yelled at those on board the offending vessel until there was a perfect Babel of confusion.

"It won't be many minutes before some craft gets smashed, if they keep on at this rate," said Charley, when the vessel grazed by the side of one that was anchored not far from the *Pearl*.

"The men must have been drinking," said Dare, and in a few moments the craft was so near that the boys could plainly see those on board, and it was only too evident that, from the captain down, all hands were in a state of complete and beastly intoxication.

They had probably just received pay for their cargo of sponges, and the money which they had labored hard and braved so many dangers for had been used to degrade them to a level many degrees lower than the brutes.

But those on the yacht had no time for contemplation of the besotted sailors, for their position of spectators was quickly changed to that of participators in the general excitement.

The vessel, which had been some distance from them, now changed her course, heading directly for the *Pearl*, and in such a direction as to strike her about midships.

"They'll run us down, sure!" cried Dare, as he jumped to his feet, with the intention of sig-

naling them; but, as he realized how useless that would be, he shouted to Charley, "See if there isn't steam enough on to send us ahead a little way, and I'll trip the anchor."

Since they had intended to remain on the sponging-grounds twenty-four hours at least, the fires had been drawn, and Charley knew even before he rushed into the engine-room that there was not an ounce of steam in the boilers; but yet he made the trial, shouting to Dare almost immediately afterward,

"It's no use; the water isn't even warm."

Dare was tugging away at the cable, and as Charley spoke he looked up at the approaching schooner.

Her sails were full, and she was not more than a hundred feet away, coming with a force that must crush the yacht like an egg-shell.

"Help me launch the boat!" Dare shouted. "She will keep us from the sharks a few moments at all events."