

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE NEWS AT TAMPA.

THE excitement among the fishermen was now intense; there seemed to be no chance but that the little steamer would be run down, and, in such event, the lives of those on board were in great peril. It was hardly possible that they could remain in the water a single instant without being devoured by the sharks, and the vessel that was sailing toward them was so high out of the water, owing to having no cargo on board, that it would hardly be possible for the boys to gain any hold of her as she came crashing on to them.

Every boat in the vicinity was headed at once toward the apparently doomed steamer, but yet not one of them could, by any possibility, reach her for some moments after the crash would come.

Meanwhile the boys on board were working with an energy and desperation such as could only have come to them in a moment of as great peril as they were then in.

The boat would hardly be of much service to

them after they got her launched, for, lying in the sun as she had been, the seams, that were only imperfectly closed at the first, were now opened so that she would hardly float more than five minutes. But, as Dare had said, she might serve to keep them from the sharks a few moments, and in that time some one of the other boats might pick them up.

It was no light task to launch the boat unaided in the few seconds they had at their disposal; but yet they succeeded just as the schooner, with her drunken crew, were within ten or twelve feet of them.

At this moment, whether by chance, or because some idea of the damage they were about to do gained an entrance into their stupefied brains, no one ever knew, the helmsman jammed his wheel hard down, and the craft was just beginning to sheer around in obedience to it when she struck the *Pearl*.

Dare and Charley were all ready to leap into the almost sinking boat when the final crash came, and Dare saw the helmsman's movement.

"Hold on!" he shouted to Charley; "she won't strike us full, and there are a good many chances that the *Pearl* won't sink."

Even as he spoke the blow came, and both boys were hurled to the deck, while the tender, which they had been at such labor in launching, was sunk immediately.

It was hardly more than a hair's-breadth which had saved them; for they were saved, even though such a blow had been struck at the little craft.

When Dare had started to trip the anchor he had, almost unconsciously, let off the turn of the cable from the miniature windlass, and the consequence was that the yacht was riding almost as free as if no anchor had been down. The wind, acting on her upper works as on a sail, had begun to force her through the water sideways, which diminished the blow very sensibly. The schooner, having begun to veer around, did not strike the *Pearl* with her cut-water, but hit a glancing blow that had the effect of forcing her along, instead of bearing her down. The impetus was so great, however, that the *Pearl* was carried along to the full length of her chain-cable, which snapped apart as if it had been a thread, nearly flinging her on to a vessel anchored on the port side.

The starboard rail was entirely stove in, but no damage had been done below the water-line, and Dare and Charley, scrambling to their feet, made every exertion to get the other anchor down before they should drift into some of the other craft, and thus work more damage to themselves.

Captain Sammy, with Bobby and Tommy, who had pulled for the yacht with all their strength when they saw the peril she was in, came

on board almost immediately after the second anchor was down. The little man occupied at least ten minutes of his time in shaking his fist and scolding at those who had been the means of losing him a cable and anchor, as well as of crushing one rail almost into kindling-wood.

After he had thus freed his mind he turned his attention to examining the damage done, and after that was ascertained he said, with a sigh of relief,

"Well, we ought to be very thankful that it is no worse. When I saw those drunken brutes sailing right down on you I made sure that the *Pearl* was gone forever, and your being saved was only a question of how long it would be before we could at you. It won't cost much time or money to make the rail as good as new, and we have got out of the scrape cheaply."

By this time the career of the vessel with her drunken crew was over. They had tried the experiment of running one of the islands down, as they had attempted to the *Pearl*, and the consequence was that the vessel was ashore in what looked to be a sinking condition.

Captain Sammy had nearly completed his work, when it became necessary to start to the aid of Dare and Charley, and now he concluded that he would try to do no more that day.

"We can stop here on our way to the reef," he said, "and then I can see those whom I have

not already talked with. We will spend the rest of the day in fixing the rail, so that we sha'n't look so much as if we had been out in a gale when we go into port, and to-morrow morning we will start for Tampa."

The tender which they were to repair having now gone to the bottom, or floated off full of water, it would be necessary to have a new boat for the *Pearl*, and Captain Sammy concluded to keep the one that had been sent him from the *Bonita*, which fact he announced to the vessel's captain, with a great deal of unnecessary scolding about those who had done the mischief.

Now that they had a boat again the boys concluded that they would go on shore, to see what the little village on the key looked like; and when Captain Sammy announced that the rail was patched as well as it could be until he could get the steamer home, they started for the land, leaving the little man alone to keep ship.

There was nothing on shore to interest them, save the "crawls" or pens for turtles, which appeared to make up the belongings of each household as much as a hen-pen does to that of a farmer's in the interior States. They inspected the occupants of these crawls, with a view to distinguishing the different species Captain Sammy had told them about, and then returned to the yacht.

That evening they had the good-fortune to

witness one of those phenomena of the sea which, once seen, is never forgotten.

The evening was calm, with no light save that shed by the stars or the little, twinkling lights displayed at the mast-head of the vessels. As the last gray shadows, remembrances of the sunset, faded into black Captain Sammy called all hands on deck to see the phosphorescent sea, which was more than usually luminous.

The water was as smooth as glass, and, whenever anything was thrown into it, it was as if the object had broken through the surface of a sea of molten gold. Striking the water with an oar caused a shower of golden drops, each one enframed, as it fell back into the sea again, in a circle of the same brilliant color, the whole forming as brilliant and beautiful a picture as the boys had ever seen.

They remained up a long time after they should have been in bed, dipping their hands beneath the surface and withdrawing them coated with gold; describing great circles in lines of fire, or sending up showers of the brilliant liquid. Captain Sammy explained that the phosphorescence was caused by an infinite number of animalculæ in the water, which gave out this brilliant light; but his explanation was so meagre and unsatisfactory that the boys privately determined to study up the matter when they got home.

It was nine o'clock on the following morning when the yacht *Pearl*, Darrell Evans commanding, swept around Mullet Key into the waters of Tampa Bay, and three hours later she was made fast to the pier at Captain Sammy's dock.

"Now you boys run home, so that your parents will know I brought you back whole, and the pirate and I will attend to cleaning up," said Captain Sammy; and the boys were not long in obeying him.

Rushing into the hotel with the impetuosity of young whirlwinds, in the hope of surprising Mr. and Mrs. Evans, their joy was considerably checked when the landlord said to them, just as they were almost tumbling up the stairs in their eagerness,

"Your father and mother went home last week."

All three stood looking at the man as if they could not understand what he had said; and, as a way of making them realize the truth of his assertion, he handed Dare a letter.

It was from Mr. Evans, stating that business had called him suddenly away, and Mrs. Evans was not willing to be left behind. He had left passage tickets for the boys, and they were to return home as soon as they received his letter.

"Oh dear! and we have got to go back without finishing our cruise," said Charley, in a mournful tone.

"Yes," replied Dare, "we must go, for he says, come as soon as we get the letter. Of course, if he had known that we should get it before the voyage was over, he would have said that we could stay until it was done; but since he didn't know that, we must go home."

It was a sorrowful party that retraced their steps to the dock to tell Captain Sammy and Tommy that, so far as they were concerned, the cruise was over. And the other members of the *Pearl's* crew were quite as sad about it as the boys were.

"It can't be helped, lads," said Captain Sammy, philosophically. "All we can hope is that you will be back here again before the winter is over. You can't leave here until four o'clock to-morrow afternoon, so you had better pack up your birds and other things you've got aboard here this afternoon; and to-morrow morning, not later than ten o'clock, come around to my house, and the pirate and I will give you a dinner such as you ought to learn how to cook."