

CHAPTER XXXIII.

GEORGE BOWERS AND FRED RANSOM MAKE A VOYAGE—THE OAK FORESTS ON THE ST. JOHN'S RIVER—THE CAPTAIN'S INVITATION TO THE BOYS ON THEIR RETURN—FISHING AT NIGHT, WITHOUT HOOKS OR BAIT—THE SPORT, AND HOW IT WAS ENJOYED.



TOWARDS the middle of April, a sloop stopped at our station. Her captain was acquainted with Captain Bowers, and came aboard of the *Flying Cloud* to say, that as his vessel was short-handed, and he had to go up the coast to St. John's River, he would be obliged if the *Flying Cloud* could let him have a man for a few days. This request Captain Bowers could not grant, but he offered the captain to let George and me go, if we were willing, as we, he was pleased to say, were supernumeraries. The captain of the sloop accepted the offer, and we boys, always ready to welcome any novelty, went aboard

of his vessel. We were gone just nineteen days.

The course of the St. John's is peculiar. A few miles from its mouth, it takes a sudden turn to the southward, and runs parallel with the coast. The shores are densely wooded, and, in the broad parts of the river, the scenery is very agreeable.

We saw great forests of oak covered with Spanish-moss. In their dense shades, the moss hung in flowing masses that looked like long gray giant-beards. When the rays of the sun struck aslant through them, they were penetrated and suffused with light so rich, yet so soft, that they seemed dripping from a bath of silvery-gold. Nothing can be imagined more funereal, more weird, than one of these dense forests, at sunset; when the darkness of night has settled on the ground, and stolen around the huge trunks of the oaks; while above, in gentle gradations of light, the long, waving, gauzy drapery grows brighter and brighter, until, on the topmost branches and twigs, it shines resplendently.

After procuring the lumber for which the sloop had entered the river, we set sail for the mouth, put to sea, and, in three days from that time, George and I were once more on board of the *Flying Cloud*. We were rejoiced to get

back to the schooner. Life on the Reef had more charm in a day, than our voyage of over half a month had afforded. As we had shipped to supply the place of one man on the voyage to St. John's River, we were paid what one man would have received for wages, and divided the sum between us.

Although the month of April was nearly spent, there was not a marked change in the climate on the Reef. As for the appearance of the country, the verdure is the same throughout the whole year, and summer is perennial. Under our mosquito bars on the quarter-deck, George and I luxuriated in the coolness of the nights. In all my experience, I recollect no couch so delightful as that quarter-deck. In clear weather, the water was so tranquil that we could just feel the undulation of the schooner, as she dipped her bow into the glassy waves. Looking upward, we beheld the pure firmament bespangled with brilliant stars; and the gentle breeze fanned us, and sang a lullaby that mingled pleasantly with the dull roar of the breakers on the far-off Reef. What more could two boys of our age desire, than all that we possessed? We had studies to give zest to recreation, and recreation and repose surrounded by romance.

A few nights after our return, the captain,

who did not often indulge in sporting, said to us boys that he would show us a kind of fishing that we had never seen. We jumped at the offer, not only because there was novelty attending it, but because the captain was to be of the party. George eagerly exclaimed:

“What day is to be, father?”

“It is not to be any day,” replied the captain, “it is to be at night,—to-night, if you like. What do you say to to-night? What do you say, Fred?”

“We are ready,” we both answered.

“What bait shall we prepare?” inquired I.

“No bait at all,” replied the captain.

“No bait!” exclaimed George. “Fishing by night, and with no bait!—well, that is strange fishing!”

“Perhaps it is because it is at night,” said I, laughing, “that we don’t need any bait, because the fish could n’t see it if it was on the hook.”

“How is it, father?” asked George, jocosely, “do the fish get caught by running afoul of the hooks in the dark?”

“We sha’n’t need hooks!” replied the captain, making his eyes as big as saucers, staring from one of us to the other, and enjoying our puzzled expression.

"We give it up, father," said George, "now do n't tease us any longer."

"You will see," said the captain, mysteriously. "Tell the men to lower one of the boats."

Captain Bowers ordered some very mysterious looking apparatus to be stowed in the bow of the boat, and in five minutes we were pulling for the shore. The captain steered along the Keys, towards the southward. We rowed close to the line of mangroves, just within the verge of their shadows, cast by the faint starlight. After having passed three or four Keys, the boat headed for the entrance to one of the inlets. Keeping towards the Key on the port hand, the captain suddenly shot the boat into an obscure inlet which led into a lake comprising nearly the whole of the Key, and which George and I imagined to be our possession by the right of original discovery.

"Do *you* know this place?" said George to his father. "I thought no one but Fred and I knew it."

"Boys are very apt to think similarly about many things," replied the captain, drily.

The oars were unshipped, and the men, grasping the overhanging boughs and twigs, dragged the boat through the inlet, until she shot out upon the placid bosom of the lake, whose shores

the starlight faintly revealed in dreamy outline.

"That'll do, my men;" said the captain, "now fire up."

On each side of the boat, the men hooked a couple of iron things, like little grates, into which receptacles they put pine knots and tarry pieces of rope. They then struck a light, and ignited the stuff. The flames sprang up, and in a minute we had a couple of bright bonfires, crackling and smoking and dropping their embers with a seething noise into the water. In, and immediately around, the boat, the scene was brilliant in the extreme; but, beyond, a circular wall of impenetrable darkness shut in the view.

"Here are your hooks," said the captain, handing George and me a pair of short spears with several barbs on them. "What are you looking up in the air for? Look at the bottom."

Hereupon, George and I, who had been gazing around, charmed at the brilliant spectacle, cast our eyes towards the water. Imagine our surprise, when we found that we could see the bottom as clearly as at noonday; and that, over it, darting about in all directions, were fish of every description. We were so delighted at this sight, that we began to shout and strike wildly into the water. The captain

commanded silence, and stationing a man astern, with a long pole, the boat was urged gently through the water, and we were cautioned to make allowance for the refraction, when we were about to strike at a fish. The grates were constantly replenished with pine knots, tarry rope, and oakum; and we went blazing along, harpooning, and struggling with our prizes, some of which were so huge that they were as much as we could master. Just as we had made the circuit of the lake, a great barracuda, terrified at the fiery dragon of a boat, which was sweeping resistlessly along, leaped into its maw. As we had secured plenty of fish, and it was neither the captain's wish, nor ours, to indulge in wanton destruction, we desisted from our sport, and laid aside our spears. A few handfuls of water, thrown into the grates, soon quenched the fire. The grates were then unhooked, emptied, and stowed away in the boat, and the men rowed until we arrived at the inner mouth of the little inlet, through which, as before, we hauled the boat. We came out upon the ruffled waters of the Reef-Channel, and within hearing of the sound of the distant surge. There was no merrier laughter along the coast, than that with which George and I, on our return, counted our spoils, and talked over our exploits in spearing.