

A FLORIDA FAMILY'S PICNIC

CHAPTER XI

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MR. MACK was the boss fisherman of the west coast of Florida, with house and warehouses in its chief city. His brand was known throughout the country and standardized the goods it covered. The shanties resting on piles in the shallow bays and the palmetto shacks on the shore of the coast were the quarters of his employees during the fishing season, where ice was kept, nets overhauled and repaired and the men slept by day, for fishing with nets in that country is mostly night work. No union dictated the hours of labor, which, governed by vagaries of fish and weather, were sometimes twenty-four to the day and sometimes no hours for a week.

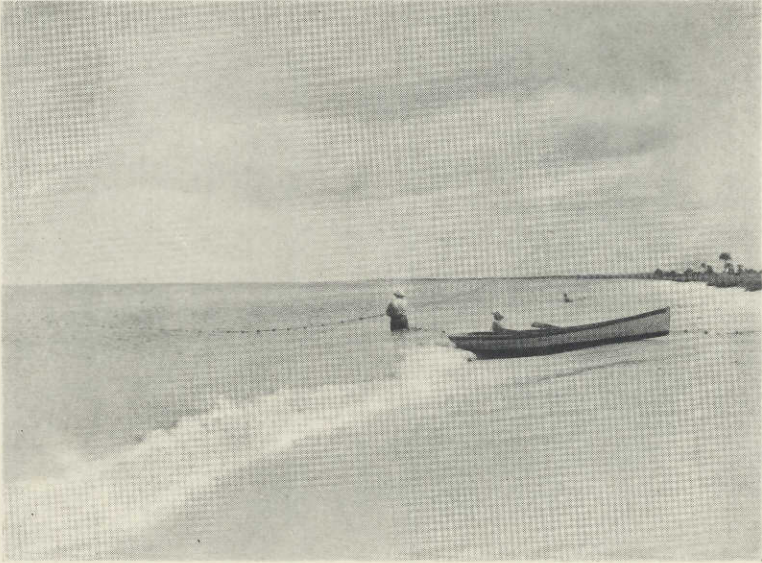
Fifty weeks in each year Mr. Mack devoted to his business, a fortnight belonged exclusively to his family. When this playtime came, the best boat in his fishing fleet, which had once been a famous yacht, was regularly house-cleaned and fitted up as a residence. Each member of the household arranged his own bunk and belongings and the forty years between the oldest and the youngest melted away and for the time they were all children together. They sailed down the coast with no other crew than they

found in the family, for they were sailors and pilots all, by an education that began generations before they were born.

The boat seemed to sail herself, the wheel rolling idly under the careless hand of a youth whose eyes were inboard and his thoughts wandering, but she always held true to her course. Sometimes a squab of a boy, three feet high, standing, with fat legs spread wide and hands thrust deep in the pockets of his brief little breeches, would say: "That jib oughter be trimmed in," and would waddle forward, brace his little feet and tug at the sheet while his brother at the wheel luffed up to help him. There was sky-larking all over the deck, but as the boat went about, somebody always happened to be standing by the mainsheet, while one or two boys were jamming the jib to windward. As they neared a pass small heads would be cocked sideways as their owners scanned the skies for a sight of the moon that they might judge if the tide would let them go through the swash channel.

All nights and many days were spent in little bays or the mouths of rivers, from which the boys explored in skiffs, crabbing in shallow waters, fishing under banks and in the deeper channels, while the older members of the family wandered along the outside beaches, watching the breaking waves and collecting shells of many hues and infinite variety, or gathering cocoa plums and sea-grapes in the thickets behind the beaches.

At Marco the grown-ups found friends to visit,



Fishing for pompano with a net.



Taking the fish from the net.

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while the boys explored the cocoanut groves, climbed the lofty palms like squirrels and sent a skiff load of the great nuts tumbling to the ground. Of their wisdom they chose the half-ripened nuts, the soft flesh of which is like unto ice cream without the ice. They sat under tall trees of avocado pears until faces and hands were smeared with the luscious, yellow, cream-like substance of the fruit, and when they went to their home on the boat, their pockets bulged and their shirtwaists threatened to burst with their loads of guavas and limes.

They patched up a net and rowed through the pass to the outer beach in search of a mess of pompano, the choicest food fish of the South. Scanning the water with judgment as mature as they themselves were youthful, they selected a bit of the beach for their first trial, overhauled their net and stowed it in the skiff with all the skill of practiced fishermen. The fattest boy volunteered to act as anchor and sitting down in the surf held on to the staff at one end of the net, the second one rowed the skiff out from the shore and back, in a semi-circle, to the beach, while the third paid out the net as the skiff progressed. The ends of the net were then dragged up on the beach and the boys, working from these ends to the middle, hauled in the whole net, the leaden sinkers sliding along the sand and the cork floats holding the top of the net to the surface. When the net was half on the beach there was commotion in the other half in the water, some pompano dashed into the meshes and others leaped over the cork line, but

enough were caught for a picnic on shore. Broiled pompano was here supplemented by the boiled bud of a young palmetto or cabbage tree, a vegetable which a Southern boy or a bear can extract in a few minutes, while a Northerner, with axe rebounding from the elastic petioles of the big tough leaves which sheathe the young tree, would sweat over the job for an hour.

One day while they were at Marco a sloop with sails *en déshabillé*, propelled by a pole, bumped into the piles and its owner crawled out on the dock with bruised and lacerated hands. Montgomery was an old blacksmith from some back country in the North where he had never been exposed to seamanship, and his account of his misfortunes gave the cruising boys fits. He told them he went out to try a boat he had just traded for and first ran into an oyster bed that he couldn't see and then he tripped over the jib string and fell on the tiller handle. When he got up, the boomstick swung across the boat and knocked him overboard into the oyster bed. He explained that he was cut up and badly bruised, but not beaten, and after pushing his boat out into the channel had sailed out of the pass all right, but got into the surf outside, where the waves banged him on the bar and broke the forks of his top boomstick and broke off the bottom boomstick halfway to the end, and then a piece got loose and smashed the top-bottom of his boat. The attempts of the boys to sympathize with the misfortunes of the narrator were painful. They really wanted to be polite but their suppressed mirth struck

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in and affected them like the colic. They never fully recovered and as the cruise continued orders to "Leggo the string that's tied to that top-boomstick," became so common that the father of the boys had to issue an injunction against their use for the sake of preserving the purity of the sea-grammar of the family.

At Caxambas the family found other friends, whose fields were filled with more than a million pine-apples, that is, when the cruisers landed, for when they left the number had been reduced. The boys were amphibious, went overboard on the slightest provocation and played together in the water like young otters. They were proud of their proficiency in water sports and as they ran out on the bowsprit one day and diving deeply swam beneath the surface across the wide channel and then played a game of leap-frog in the water, they succeeded in impressing a youth who stood looking at them from the deck of a Northern boat which was tied to the wharf. He was a son of the owner of the boat and I, who happened to be looking on, was regretting that the harsher climate of his home had probably kept him from acquiring the skill of the boys he was watching, when he suddenly went below and quickly coming back in bathing trunks, ran fifty feet up the rigging to the cross-trees like a cat and dove far out into the stream. He swam swiftly back to his boat, scrambled up to the crosstrees and again sprang far out, this time holding his body horizontally as he fell, until near the surface when he turned a quick somersault

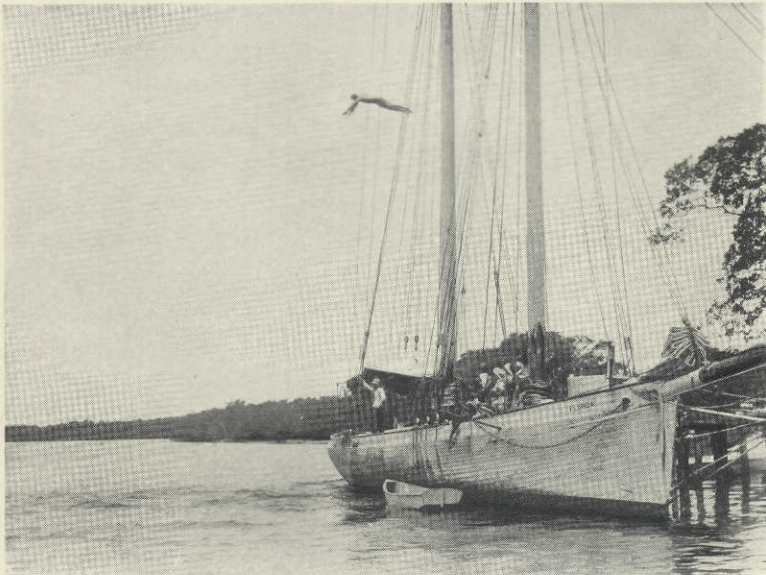
Florida Enchantments

and plunged headfirst deeply in the water. When he came up this time, it was on the farther side of the picnic boat, under which he had swam, and as he joined the boys in their game I wasted no more sympathy on him for his lack of familiarity with the water.

From Caxambas to Cape Sable is mostly clam bed and when it came to treading the raw material of clam chowder out of the oozy mud with bare feet, even the women folks had to be counted in. In the mouths of the rivers the boys could gather in a few minutes from the trees more oysters than they could eat in a week and a net set across any deep channel was pretty sure of a four hundred-pound loggerhead turtle as soon as the tide turned and the net began to "fish." Then, too, there was always the chance, if the place of setting the net was chosen with wisdom, of the capture of a delicate, young, grass-fed green turtle, stuffed with soups, steaks and stews of matchless flavor. One evening they anchored just within the mouth of the beautiful Rodgers River and watched the birds wading upon the shallow banks, and afterward flying to their near-by roosts, until night fell and then, as the boys listened to coons quarreling on the oyster reefs, the occasional scream of a panther and the bellowing of big alligators, they planned for the next day an excursion by land and an exploration by water up the river. But in the soft climate of South Florida days melt away, a ball and chain wouldn't keep the hours in sight, and when the next morning came, Mr. Mack held



“Ran fifty feet up the rigging and dove far out into the stream.”



“This time holding his body horizontally.”

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up his watch to his family and said: "Forty-eight hours more," the boys knew the time had been stretched to the uttermost. A strong wind was blowing from their home two hundred miles away, and they were in honor bound to be there in two days.

In five minutes the boat was close hauled on the first of a series of tacks that would continue night and day up the coast until the anchor was dropped in the harbor of their home.

