

CHAPTER XV: THE TWO MEN

The girls need have had no fears. The youth in the boat seemed to know what he was doing. He was pulling up the anchor rope now, and a moment later he had the grapple in his scow. Then he let his craft slip down stream until he was below the Gem and in a position to tow it.

As he did this there was a swirl in the water just above him, and a queerly-shaped body half arose, falling back with a splash.

The girls had a glimpse of something like a seal, with a queer head, not unlike that of a small hippopotamus.

“Look!” cried Mollie. “That was no alligator! What in the world is it?”

“That’s a manatee—a sea-cow, some folks call ‘em!” answered the ragged youth, as he poled his boat toward them, towing the Gem. “They’re harmless, but I had to shoot this one to make him let go. I didn’t hurt him much. I never see one so far inland as this, though. I’ll have your boat there in a minute.”

“Don’t hurry,” said Betty kindly. “As long as she’s safe we are all right. It’s awfully kind of you to get her for us. We thought an alligator had her.”

“It was rather queer,” said the ragged youth. “I never see a boat towed by a manatee before. I’ll be ashore in a minute.”

He was poling his scow over toward the girls, towing their boat in, aided by the current. A little later he had leaped ashore with the rope, pulling the anchor after him.

“We’re a thousand times obliged to you!” exclaimed Mollie, impulsively. “We never should have known what to do without our boat. We’re from Bentonville.”

“Yes? That’s quite a ways down.” The youth, in spite of his rags, had a good-looking face and a pleasant manner. He seemed restless and afraid, and was constantly glancing about him, as though in fear of seeing someone or something he did not care to encounter.

“Would you—I mean, can we do anything for you?” half stammered Betty. She wanted to offer him money, but she did not quite know how he would accept it. “If you



are going down stream,” she went on, “we could take you as far as we are going. If you would come with us, perhaps—”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t think of it!” the youth cried—cried out in very fear, it seemed to Mollie, who was observing him narrowly. “I must go on—go on alone. I am going for help!”

“For help!” exclaimed Betty. “What is the trouble? Perhaps we can help you. We are from Mr. Stonington’s orange grove, and if we told him you needed help—”

“No, no!” interrupted the youth, glancing about him nervously. “It isn’t that kind of help. I am trying to help someone else. I—I can’t tell you. But I must be getting on. And will you do me a favor?” he asked suddenly.

“Of course!” cried Betty. “We will be only too glad to, since you did so much for us. Only for you our boat might be far up the river now. What can we do for you?”

“Don’t tell anyone you saw me,” begged the youth, earnestly. “There are those who would stop me—take me back where I came from. They are after me—they may be below me, trying to head me off. If you meet them—meet any rough-looking men who ask for me—don’t tell them about me. Don’t set them after me, please.”

“You may be sure we will not!” exclaimed Betty, warmly. “Are you from—”

“Please don’t ask me!” he exclaimed. “It is so much easier to throw them off the trail if you really know nothing. So don’t question me.”

“Very well, we won’t. But if you are escaping, perhaps you need money—”

“No, I have some, thank you,” and he showed a small roll of bills. “He gave it to me,” and he seemed to indicate, by a nod, someone farther up the stream.

“Then do you think you will be all right?” asked Mollie. Amy and Grace had taken no part in the talk. They seemed to be content to look at the strange youth who had rendered the outdoor girls such a service.

“Oh, yes, I’ll be all right,” was the answer, but the ragged youth looked about him apprehensively. “I must be getting on now, after help—for him. Don’t say you saw me—don’t tell them anything about me.”

“We won’t,” promised Betty. “You may rely on us.”

“Thank you—good-bye!” He stepped into his skiff and quickly poled out from shore, dropping down with the current. The girls gazed after him for a moment. Strangely had he come into their lives, and as strangely gone out, without revealing his identity. And he had done them such a service, too.

“Well, we have our boat back,” remarked Betty, with a sigh of thankfulness. “I wonder what possessed that sea cow to swim off with it?”



“Probably it was only an accident,” said Mollie. “Well, we certainly have had a day of it. Now let’s get back before anything else happens. Gracious, how swiftly he is poling along!”

She pointed to the youth, who was almost out of sight at a bend in the river.

“He wants to get away from those who are after him,” observed Grace. “I wonder if he is a desperate criminal?”

“He didn’t look at all like a criminal,” spoke Amy. “I think he had a nice face.”

“He wasn’t bad looking,” admitted Betty. “Poor fellow, he was very nervous, though.”

“And no wonder—meeting four girls at once!” laughed Mollie.

“What shall we do if we meet those men who are after him?” asked Grace. “I shall be so frightened!”

“We won’t meet them!” declared Betty. “If we do we need not speak to them. But if they insist we can say truthfully that we don’t know who that young fellow was, nor where he went.”

“He’s out of sight now, at all events,” spoke Amy. “I wonder whom he is going to get help for? I wish he had told us more.”

“I don’t,” answered Betty, promptly. “The less we know the less we can tell if any men question us. Now let’s get aboard and get back. No more manatees for me!”

The Gem was none the worse for her queer tow, and soon, with the girls aboard, was dropping down stream again. The strange youth was not in sight, even when the turn of the river was made, but he may have poled off into one of the many little bayous, or tributary streams, that joined the main one.

“I’m glad he’s out of sight,” murmured Grace. “If those men should come after him—”

She stopped suddenly, and stared ahead. There, coming around a turn in the river, was a small motor boat containing two men, who, at the sight of the Gem, headed directly for her, at the same time indicating by gestures that they wished to speak to those aboard.

