

CHAPTER XVII: IN DANGER

The girls looked at one another on hearing Mr. Hammond's warning. The same thought was in the mind of each.

"What—what kind of suspicious characters were they?" asked Betty.

"Oh, just the usual kind," replied the overseer. "I don't want to alarm you, and you needn't be afraid. They're mostly a cowardly set that always congregate around where a lot of work is going on, hoping to get money without labor, either by some form of chance game, or by deliberately taking advantage of some of the simple-minded colored hands. I ordered these two away a couple of times, and I'll do more than that the next time I see 'em."

"Did they—did they come in a motor boat?" faltered Mollie.

"I didn't notice. But they weren't the kind of fellows I want hanging around here, especially when pay-day comes. But don't think any more of what I said. I'm going to give you a young fellow to accompany you. He knows the river and the region around like a book, and anyone who tries to bother you when you're out he'll make short work of. He's a sort of deputy constable."

"Why do you think—I mean, in what way do you think anyone might try to bother us?" asked Betty.

"Oh, various ways. They might try to sell you a lot of useless trinkets, knowing you're from the North. Fancy shells, sea beans, curios and the like of that. You see, there isn't much ready money floating around among the poor people here. Even some of the scattered Seminoles—or what were once Seminole Indians—try to make a living selling trinkets they make themselves, and if they thought you had money they would become annoying. But Tom Osborne will see to 'em, all right. He knows a lot of 'em. When are you going?"

"Oh, in about an hour," answered Grace. "We're going to take our lunch and stay all day."

"That will suit Tom fine. He's very fond of—lunch!" and Mr. Hammond laughed.

"Doesn't he like—girls?" asked Mollie, with a blush.

“You can tell that better than I after you’ve met him. He’s one of my bookkeepers, and a fine young fellow. I’ll send him along to you.”

“But maybe we ought not to take him from his work,” suggested Betty, feeling that perhaps Mr. Stonington would not like the operation of his orange business interfered with by the pleasure of herself and her friends.

“Oh, I’ll make it all right with uncle,” laughed Amy. “We must enjoy ourselves while we’re here.”

“You needn’t worry,” spoke Mr. Hammond with a laugh. “Tom will be glad to come, and the worst of the rush is over now. Just consider him your escort, and he’ll do anything you want, from catching an alligator to getting your meals. He’s a handy young fellow, Tom is, and he knows all the streams about here.”

While the overseer was gone to summon the young man, the girls prepared for the little outing. They had put up a lunch, or, rather, Aunt Hannah, the genial colored “mammy” had done it for them, putting in plenty of fried chicken and corn bread.

“Perhaps we’d better have more,” suggested Mollie, to Aunt Hannah, when the fact of Tom Osborne going along was mentioned.

“Bress yo’ he’at, honey!” exclaimed the buxom cook, “I done put in enough fo’ two mo’ gen’men if yo’ all would laik t’ take ‘em along. Don’t yo’ all worry!”

“No, I think one young man will be sufficient,” laughed Betty. “Only I didn’t want him to go hungry, and I know the appetites of my friends.”

“Speak for yourself, if you please!” chided Mollie. “You eat as much as any of us.”

“I wonder if those two suspicious characters Mr. Hammond spoke of could be the ones who followed us in the boat?” asked Amy, to change the subject.

“They could have been,” remarked Grace, “but I wouldn’t want to think so.”

“Why not?” asked Mollie.

“Because it would show that they were still following us.”

“Perhaps it was unwise that I told them where we were from,” said Betty, “but I did it for the best. I didn’t want them to think that we had no friends near at hand.”

“Of course,” rejoined Amy. “You meant it all right. And they may not have been the same ones at all. Mr. Hammond did not say they made inquiries for us, or for that poor young fellow. What was it they called him—’The Duck?’”

“Loon—loon!” corrected Betty, with a laugh.

“Well, I knew it was some kind of a bird,” asserted Amy. “I wonder why they called him that?”



“A loon is supposed to be a crazy sort of a bird,” went on Betty, “and, come to think of it, that poor chap didn’t look very bright. Maybe he was half-witted, and that’s why they called him The Loon.”

“Well, he knew enough to shoot the manatee, and get our boat for us,” defended Grace. “I don’t think he was very stupid.”

“Oh, I don’t mean it that way,” said Betty quickly. “I only suggested that perhaps those mean men—I’m sure they were mean—might have called him that to suit their own purposes. But I think we are well rid of them, anyhow. Here comes Mr. Hammond, and that must be Tom with him,” and she indicated two figures approaching.

“Oh, are you going to call him Tom?” gasped Grace.

“I don’t see why not,” was the calm answer. “He looks just like the sort of a nice young chap whom one would call Tom.”

“Betty Nelson!” cried Mollie. “I’m going to tell—”

“Hush!” commanded the Little Captain, quickly. “I haven’t done it yet.”

Mr. Hammond presented the young man, who seemed quite at his ease under the scrutiny of four pairs of eyes—pretty eyes, all of them, too.

“You needn’t worry when Tom is along,” said the overseer with a laugh, as he named each of the girls in turn. “Now go off and have a good time. I depend on you, Tom, to bring them safely back.”

“I will, Mr. Hammond. Are you ready, young ladies?” and he smiled at them.

The girls started for the boat, into which a colored boy had already put the baskets of lunch. Somehow or other Betty naturally fell into step beside Tom. She looked up at him frankly and said:

“Mr. Hammond told us your last name, but I have forgotten it, I’m ashamed to say.”

“It’s Osborne. But I’d rather you’d call me Tom, if you don’t mind. Everyone does around here—that is, all my friends, of course,” he added quickly.

“Then we’d like to be your friends,” said Betty with a smile, and a calm look at Mollie, who was making signs behind Tom’s back. Obvious signs they were, too. Betty looked triumphant, as though saying: “There, didn’t I tell you?”

Tom Osborne proved that he knew something about motor boats, and was also versed in the ways of making girls comfortable. He asked if they wanted him to steer, and as Betty had not taken her craft down the river very often she agreed. The girls sat on the after deck, under a wide-spread awning, and chatted of the sights they saw.



They emerged into Lake Chad, skirted its shores and swept into the river beyond. They passed several other power craft and one or two houseboats in which were gay parties.

At the suggestion of Tom, they decided to go up a little side stream to where he said was a pleasant place to eat lunch, and this they reached about noon.

“Now, if you girls want to walk about and see what there is to be seen,” he told them, “I’ll get out the victuals and set the table on the grass under that tree,” and he indicated it. “I’ll call you when I’m ready.”

Betty and her chums assented, and Tom proceeded to set out the luncheon. The girls strolled on for some distance, and Mollie, attracted by some flowers on the end of a small spit of land, extending for some distance into the stream, walked toward them, the others following.

They picked many blossoms, and were watching a pair of large turtles when Amy, glancing toward the main land, which was reached by crossing a narrow neck of sand, uttered a cry of alarm.

“Look!” she gasped, pointing to two long, black objects stretched right across the narrow place. “Alligators! Two big ones!”

It was only too true. The girls’ way back was blocked.

