

CHAPTER XXI: TO THE RESCUE

For a few seconds it was like a tableau, the strange young man, more ragged than before (if that were possible) standing in the midst of the clearing, and gazing as though spellbound at the girls in the motor boat.

On their part, Betty and her chums, following the half-whispered announcement made by Betty, stared at The Loon almost as if he might be a ghost of the Florida forest.

For perhaps a quarter of a minute they all remained thus, scarcely moving—hardly breathing—and then the young man made a slow turn. He seemed about to plunge back into the tangle whence he had come.

“Don’t do that!” said Mollie, hardly above a whisper. “He mustn’t do that!” and she seemed appealing to her chums. “We must keep him here—speak to him—perhaps he knows where Tom went.”

“Or, if he doesn’t, perhaps he can tell us which way to go to get home,” breathed Grace. “He’s some company, anyhow.”

The Loon, to give him the title bestowed on him by the men in the boat, hesitated as he caught the sound of whispering. He shifted from one foot to the other, much after the manner of some animal seeking to escape unnoticed.

He took a step backward. By this time Betty had brought her boat close to the extending tree branch, where she had made fast before. The power had been shut off and the Gem had drifted to the former mooring place. Now Betty was ready for action.

“I beg your pardon,” she said in a low voice, and with an intonation calculated to disperse the fears of even the most timid youth, “but will you be so good as to help us again? We are the girls, you know, whose boat you got when the manatee was towing it away.”

“Wha—what?” gasped the other, and he seemed much afraid.

“We’re the same girls,” went on Betty. “You know, we saw you poling down the river that day. If you come closer you can see us and make sure. We need help again.

We are lost and a friend of ours is missing. Wait, I'll light the lamps," and with a turn of the switch Betty set aglow the electric lights, operated by a storage battery.

The youth started again. Clearly he was a most timid creature.

"We saw the men who were after you," put in Mollie, thinking to add to his confidence. "And we didn't tell; did we, girls."

"No!" came in a chorus. In spite of the rather unprepossessing appearance of the youth the girls were glad to see him.

"Now will you help us again?" asked Mollie. "We've had a dreadful time, and we need help. You won't go away; will you?"

"N—no!" was the hesitating answer. "I came to look for you, but I wasn't sure—you see I have to be so careful."

"Gracious, I wonder if he thinks we wanted to capture him?" thought Grace, feeling about amid the cushions for some chocolates. That was a sure sign Grace had recovered her equanimity.

"You came to look for us?" echoed Betty, wonderingly.

"Yes, miss," was the answer. "He sent me to find you."

"He? Who do you mean?" Betty questioned anxiously.

"Tom—Tom Osborne. He told me to come here and tell you he couldn't come."

"Couldn't come—why?" Betty's voice had a note of fear in it now.

"Cause they've caught him. He's cotched, Miss."

"Caught? By whom?" It was Mollie who questioned now.

Before answering The Loon, which name seemed to fit the poor creature well, glided forward, glancing back nervously over his shoulder now and then, as though he feared pursuit.

"Oh dear!" murmured Grace. "I don't like this. It's worse than the ghost of the island."

"Be quiet," urged Betty. "It may be all right yet. I'm going to light more lamps."

Thus far she had only set aglow one in the after cockpit, and the red and green side lights, together with the one on the small signal mast. Now she flooded the cabin with radiance, for it was getting more and more gloomy in the forest clearing.

"Won't you come aboard?" urged Betty kindly. "We will do all we can for Tom Osborne if he is in trouble. We can't understand why he deserted us. We have been in much distress, we got lost and had to come back. Come aboard and tell us all about it so we will know what to do. Perhaps you are hungry. We left food there," and she indicated it. "Bring it here, and then perhaps you can take us back to the bungalow. The men there will organize a searching party if need be. But tell us who has caught Tom."



The Loon did not answer for a minute. He looked to where Betty pointed, saw the packet of food and went toward it eagerly. Then he brought it to the moored boat.

"I am hungry," he said simply.

"Then eat first, and talk later," urged Mollie. "I know what it is to be hungry."

"I'll admit I'm hungry now," said Grace. "We left enough food so we could have some, I think."

"Hush! we had a good lunch," said Betty, "and there is no telling what will happen before morning. Grace, you and Amy might make some hot chocolate."

"Will you tell us your name now, or are you still afraid?" asked Betty of the youth, who was eating ravenously. "The men called you—The Loon—I believe it was."

"Yes, Miss, that's my name. You see I'm not quite right in the head. I got hurt when I was a baby. I'm harmless, but I can't do much work—I'm not strong. My name is Harry Jackson."

"And have you no home—no friends?"

"Not as I knows on, Miss, no. I had an uncle once, but he died. I live around the camps—sometimes the men is good to me, and sometimes not."

He ate quickly, but daintily, and was not all uncouth. From time to time he glanced about like some frightened animal.

"They calls me The Loon," he went on. "But I know some things. I know more than they want me to."

"Do you think you could pilot this boat to Mr. Stonington's place?" asked Mollie with much anxiety.

"Yes, Miss, I could. I know my way all around these waters. I can take you there. But we ought to help him—help Tom and the other one. I promised I'd come for you."

"Then tell us where Tom is—who has him—how did he come to send you for us—who is 'the other one'?"

Betty questioned thus rapidly. The Loon passed his hand over his forehead as though to brush away the cobwebs from his poor brain. Then he said:

"The same men caught him, Miss."

"What same men?"

"The ones who were after me. There's a camp back there in the woods, and they have him, and the other one, too. I started for help for him long ago, but they got after me and took me back. Then they brought Tom in this afternoon. He saw me and told me to come for you. They didn't see him tell me. We've got to go to the rescue."



"I should say we had!" exclaimed Betty. "This is all very mysterious, Harry." She could not bear to call him The Loon. "Can you tell us any more about all this? Why did Tom go away?"

"That's it!" cried the queer youth. "That's what I've been trying to remember. He told me to be sure and tell you that he didn't run away. He saw you getting flowers, he said, and he went off in the woods a way to look for some rare kind for you. He didn't mean to go so far. Then the men caught him, and took him away before he could warn you. That's what he wanted me to be sure and tell you. Now I've remembered," and he seemed quite pleased in his own peculiar way.

"But who is this other one you started to help?" asked Grace, a strange eagerness creeping into her voice.

"Wait, please, wait," begged The Loon, again passing his hand over his brow. "I can't think very fast. I know the bad men in the lumber camp had Tom, and the other one—I don't know his name. But maybe we can rescue them both. If you'll come—"

He sprang from the boat to the tree branch and thence ashore. Then he stood waiting in the glare of the boat's lights.

"Wait," said Betty gently. "We must go for help, first. Come, Harry, get aboard and take us to the orange grove. Then we will get Mr. Hammond and some men to come to the rescue."

