

CHAPTER XXII: THE EVERGLADE CAMP

The Loon stood irresolute for a few seconds. He seemed to want to rush off into the dark woods again, and evidently expected the girls to follow him. But, though they were very anxious to effect the rescue of their friend Tom, and the other unknown, held in some distant camp, Betty and her chums would take no risks.

“Come!” called the Little Captain to the simple-minded lad, “we will go for help, and soon be back here—if you can guide us.”

“Oh, yes, I know the way all over these parts—even in the Everglades.”

“Are there Everglades here?” asked Mollie, who had heard much of those strange, floating forests.

“A small patch,” answered The Loon, “but not much like the real Everglades. It is a big swampy tract, and the camp is in there.”

“A turpentine camp?” asked Grace, filled with sudden hope.

“No, the bosses are getting out a certain kind of wood. Oh! but it is hard work. The wood is partly under water, and the bugs and mosquitoes and alligators are terrible. I ran away, for I couldn’t stand it.”

“Poor fellow,” murmured Amy. “Oh, to think of Tom Osborne and some other young fellow being there.”

“Just like my poor brother Will,” agreed Grace. “Oh, I wonder if he could be the ‘other one’ he refers to! Listen,” she went on to the simple youth eagerly, “I am going to describe a young man to you. I want you to tell me if he is like the one you once



tried to rescue—the time you saved our boat,” and she gave a close description of her brother.

“Is the ‘other one’ like that?” she asked breathlessly.

The Loon shook his head.

“No,” he said slowly, “not at all like that. He is very thin, this one, and he is lame.”

“Oh dear!” half sobbed Grace. “I was beginning to have such hope!”

“Never mind,” consoled Betty. “We will find your brother yet. Come now, we are losing time. Come, Harry,” she said gently.

“And the other one, too?” he asked eagerly. “I promised I would help him, and took his money; but I lost it.”

“Yes, we will rescue him, too,” said Betty. “Come now.”

The Loon was satisfied that his friend would be helped, so he sprang into the boat. Betty started the engine and then, with the powerful gas headlight aglow, she turned the wheel over to The Loon.

However simple-minded the poor youth might be, however undecided and timid in the forest, he seemed to be a new person on the water. There was a self-reliance about him, a poise and a certain ability that he seemed to have acquired suddenly. Without a trace of hesitation he guided the boat through the winding course of the creek that flowed into the main stream.

Coming to the turn he took an entirely different direction from that followed by the girls.

“That’s where we made our mistake!” exclaimed Mollie.

The Loon did not respond—he was too busy peering ahead at the dark water, which was illuminated only for a comparatively short distance by the searchlight.



“Suppose—suppose we hit—an alligator!” voiced Grace.

“Don’t suppose at all,” retorted Betty. “It’s bad for the nerves.”

It was now so dark that the girls could not see just the course taken, and so could not know where it was they had made other mistakes. But the darkness did not seem to bother The Loon. Like the bird whose name he bore he seemed able to see in the gloom as well as in the light.

“Are we coming back with the men when they make the rescue?” asked Grace.

“Oh, no!” exclaimed Amy. “I’d be afraid.”

“I wouldn’t!” declared Mollie. “I think we ought to come along.”

“So do I!” added Grace. “That other one, of whom Harry spoke, may be my brother after all; even if it isn’t a turpentine camp we are going to.”

“It hardly seems possible,” objected Betty. “The description is so different. And Will isn’t lame.”

“No,” responded Grace, in a low voice. “But, oh, how I wish we could rescue him!”

“Did this other young man—the one who gave you money—tell you his name?” asked Betty, determined to try again to bring some glimmer of memory to The Loon.

“Yes,” answered the simple-minded lad, “but I can’t think of it. My mind isn’t all there,” he added cheerfully, as though it was something to be proud of.

“It wasn’t Will, was it?” asked Grace.

“No. The men called him Hippity-hop, ‘cause he was lame, I guess. But maybe I could find your brother.”



“I wish someone could,” murmured Grace, with a half sob.

The Gem chugged on through the darkness, making turn after turn, twisting here and there in the water, The Loon seeming to know the channel perfectly. In a much shorter time than the girls had expected they made a turn that a few seconds later brought them out on a broad stream.

“Now I know where we are!” cried Betty. “This is the Mayfair river—our river; isn’t it?”

“Yes,” answered The Loon. “We shall soon be at your orange grove now.”

A few minutes later they saw a sudden glare of light and heard the firing of guns. Then they noticed boats here and there on the stream, each one containing several lanterns, while the occupants were shouting from time to time.

“Look! Look!” exclaimed Grace.

“Hush!” called Betty. “They are calling us!”

The girls could distinguish their names being spoken.

“They’re searching for us!” cried Mollie. “Here we are!” she shouted, and her voice carried to the searchers and as they saw the lights of the Gem the boats converged toward her.

Mr. Stonington and Mr. Hammond were in one, and Amy’s “uncle” greeted her and the others with alarm in his tones.

“What happened? Where were you? We have imagined all sorts of terrible things about you.”

“We got lost,” explained Betty quickly, “and some men have captured Tom. They are holding him a prisoner in an Everglade camp. This young man can take us back there. We must rescue him,” and they quickly filled in the other details of the story.



“Well, this beats all!” exclaimed Mr. Hammond. “Those timber men are getting worse and worse all the while. We’ll have to teach them a lesson!”

“Will you rescue them?” asked The Loon.

“Surely, Harry,” spoke the foreman, who knew the simple-minded lad. “We’ll get right after the fellows. What do you say, Mr. Stonington?”

“I say yes, of course.”

“And may we come?” asked Grace. “My brother may be there.”

The two men did not answer for a moment. Then Mr. Hammond said in a low voice:

“Their launch would come in useful, and really there is not much danger in daylight.”

“Very well,” said Mr. Stonington. “I’ll go along too.”

“Aren’t you going to rescue them to-night?” asked The Loon.

“It would be impossible, Harry,” said Mr. Hammond, gently. “They might escape in the darkness, and take your friend, and Tom, with them. We’ll get ready to descend on their camp at daybreak. That will be best.”

After some thought The Loon agreed to this, and those in the other searching boats, one or two of them being small launches, having been informed of the return of the girls, the whole flotilla went back to the orange grove.

The Loon was given a place to sleep, and then the girls told more of their story. Mr. Stonington told how, becoming worried over the long stay of the young people, he had organized a searching party, getting more and more alarmed as the hours went by without the return of Betty and her chums.



It was rather a restless night in Orangeade, and all were astir early, for they wanted to be at the Everglade camp by daylight. Two extra launches besides the Gem made the trip, the others carrying a number of sturdy men headed by Mr. Hammond. Mr. Stonington went with the girls, The Loon steering.

By taking a little different course the boats were able to approach close to the camp in the forest fastness, and at a signal from The Loon all came to a stop.

“We had better walk the rest of the way,” said the half-witted lad. “They may hear the boats.”

“Good idea,” said Mr. Hammond. “Harry is smarter than any of us think.”

A faint gleam of light was beginning to straggle through the trees when the party, with The Loon in the lead, set off to march to the Everglade camp. There was a narrow trail, and Mr. Stonington insisted on the girls keeping to the rear.

Silent was the approach, and the only sounds heard were those made by the awakening denizens of the woods. Presently those in front of the girls halted. Word was whispered back along the line:

“We’re there!”

“Then don’t you come any farther,” said Mr. Stonington to Betty and the others. “There may be no trouble; but it’s best to be on the safe side. We’ll bring the rescued ones back here.”

Wondering what would happen, and not a little alarmed, the girls waited.

