

CHAPTER XXIII: THE ESCAPE

Taken by surprise by the sudden rush of Mr. Hammond and his men those in charge of the Everglade camp, and the miserable creatures they held in virtual bondage, offered little resistance. There was neither time nor chance for any.

Well armed, but fortunately not being obliged to use their weapons, the men from the orange grove made such a show of strength that resistance seemed out of the question.

The camp, as the girls saw afterward, was merely a collection of miserable huts. Some were better than others, and it was to these that the rescuers turned their attention, for in them were the “bosses” of the camp.

Mr. Hammond and his men made a rush for these, and, surrounding them, called on those within to surrender. At first there was sleepy-eyed surprise as the rough men ran out. Some showed a disposition to fight, but Mr. Hammond coolly said:

“It’s of no use, men. We’ve got you just where we want you, and we’re enough in numbers to take you all prisoners. We only want a couple of young fellows you have here.”

“We’ve a right to all the help we have!” growled the leader of the campers: “We’ve got the papers to show it, too!”

“I don’t doubt but what you’ve got papers—forged ones, though,” replied Mr. Hammond sternly. “We won’t dispute that. But you haven’t any papers for my man, Tom Osborne.”

“Tom Osborne—your man—was he the one that—”

The leader began thus, but he did not finish. He saw the damaging admission he was about to make.

“Yes, Tom Osborne!” exclaimed Mr. Hammond. “I say Tom, where are you?” he called, loudly.

“Here, Mr. Hammond!” was a shout from a distant shack. “Are the young ladies all right?”

“Yes, they’re here to help rescue you. Tumble over there, some of you,” directed Mr. Hammond to his men, “and let Tom out. Break in the door!”

“I say now!” began the leader of the campers, “that won’t do—”

“That’s enough from you,” warned Mr. Hammond sternly. “Smash in that door, men!”

A little later Tom Osborne, rather forlorn and miserable from his night’s imprisonment in a tumble-down shack, walked out, his bonds having been cut.

“Now for your friend, Harry,” said Mr. Hammond to The Loon. “We must get him out next.”

“There’s some young fellow in the shack next to where I was,” said Tom Osborne. “I heard him talking to himself early in the evening, but not since daylight. I guess he’s the one you mean.”

A rush was made for the wretched place, and the door was burst in, but the hut was empty.

“He’s gone!” cried The Loon. “They’ve taken him to some other place. Oh, I’ll never be able to keep my word to him!”

“We’ll find him,” declared Mr. Hammond. “I don’t know who he was, but we’ll get him. Look in every shack, men!”

In turn every cabin was inspected. Many wretched young men, and some old ones, too, were routed out, but the proprietors of the camp seemed to have a right to their services, either by contract, or through the action of the criminal laws. Sad indeed was their plight, but the rescuers had no legal right to take them away.

“Though I can, and will, proceed against you for taking Tom Osborne,” declared Mr. Hammond. “And I’ll see to it that you get the punishment you deserve.”

Mr. Stonington said something in a low voice to the overseer.

“Oh, yes,” went on Mr. Hammond. “If you want to tell what became of this other young man, whom you seem to have kept against his will, I’ll do what I can to have your sentence lightened.”

“He must have got away,” said the head lumberman, sullenly. “He was such a spunky chap that we kept him locked up. And we had a right to him, too. He signed a contract.”

“Probably an illegal one, if I’m any judge of your methods,” said Mr. Hammond, grimly. “I don’t blame him for getting away, but I wish we could have rescued him. He may be in a bad plight in this swamp.”

An inspection of the cabin where Tom had said some other prisoner had been held showed a board forced off in the rear, and it was evident that the unknown young man



had gotten out this way when the guard was asleep—for the camp was kept under guard, so fearful were the bosses that their wretched slaves would escape.

“Well, we can’t do much more here,” said Mr. Hammond, looking about. They had inspected every cabin, and the men had searched in various places.

“You have my last word,” said Mr. Hammond, grimly, as the rescue party prepared to leave the miserable camp, “if you produce that young man I’ll do what I can to have the courts deal easy with you. If not—you’ll get the limit!”

“I tell you he escaped!” insisted the head of the lumbermen. “And if you think you can scare us, go ahead. If you hadn’t so many with you, and if my men had the spunk of chickens, there’d be a different ending to this,” he added, vindictively.

“Don’t be rash,” advised Mr. Hammond.

The girls were permitted a distant view of the camp, and then they started for their boats, Tom in the midst of the girls, explaining to them his seeming desertion. The Loon was worried over his failure to rescue the unknown young man who had given him money.

“Never mind,” consoled Mr. Hammond. “We may find him later. We’ll keep a lookout as we go along. If he has any sense he’ll get out of this swamp, anyhow.”

“I wonder who he may be?” said Grace. “Oh, if only we could go to the rescue of my brother. I wish we would get some news of him.”

“We all do, dear,” spoke Mollie, gently.

