

## CHAPTER XIX: LOST

Grace burst out crying. She said she knew it was silly, and not at all what an outdoor girl should do, and, very contritely afterward, she told the others how sorry she was that she had given way. But she just could not seem to help it. Without reserve she sobbed on Amy's shoulder.

For a moment Mollie and Betty, looking at one another, feared that Amy, too, would give way to her feelings, and that they would have two hysterical ones on their hands. But the little outburst of Grace seemed to act as a sort of tonic to Amy, who put her arms about her chum, murmuring comforting words.

"Oh, what—what are we going to do?" sobbed Grace.

"We're not going to cry—at any rate!" snapped Mollie. "At least I'm not."

There was an incisiveness—a sharpness—to her voice that made Grace look up a bit angrily.

"I—I'm not crying!" she said, and there was more energy in her voice than had been noticeable for some time.

"Well, it's a very good imitation of it then," went on Mollie. "Crying isn't going to do any good, and it gets on the nerves of all of us."

"I'm sorry—I couldn't seem to help it," spoke Grace, in a low voice. "I—I won't do it again. But oh, what are we going to do?"

No one knew what to answer. Certainly they were in a situation that needed help to enable them to escape from it. They could not approach the alligators—at least they did not think they could, though perhaps the creatures would have fled when the girls came near. And the snakes, while not aggressive, seemed to be numerous in the water that offered the only ford to shore. And moccasins, the girls had been told, were deadly poisonous.

"If Tom would only come!" muttered Betty. "I can't see what keeps him," and she looked anxiously toward where the luncheon was spread. But there was no sign of the young man.



“Maybe we could drive the snakes away by throwing more stones,” suggested Grace, who seemed to have gotten over her little hysterical outburst. “Let’s try it.”

“It’s worth trying,” admitted Betty. “At least I don’t believe the snakes would come out to attack us, and we might be able to drive them away.”

The girls, glad of the chance to do something, collected a pile of stones and showered them into the water. Then when the ripples had cleared they peered anxiously at the sand bar.

“They’re gone!” cried Amy joyously. “Now we can wade to shore.”

“Better wait,” advised Mollie.

There was an anxious pause, and then Betty said in a hopeless sort of tone:

“No, there they come back again,” and she pointed to where the writhing serpents could be seen. Evidently the sand bar was a sort of feeding place for them, and though they might disappear for the moment at some disturbance, they returned.

Hopelessly the girls looked at one another. Then they glanced into the water, that seemed fairly swarming with the snakes. There appeared to be more than ever of them. Then Amy looked toward the neck of land and gave a cry of surprise—of joy.

“Look!” she exclaimed. “They’re going—the alligators. At least they’re—moving!”

“I hope they don’t move toward us!” gasped Grace.

The saurians indeed seemed waked into life. Whether they had completed their sun bath, or whether the call of their appetites moved them, it was impossible to say. But they were walking about, dragging their ponderous, fat, squatty bodies, and their big tails.

“Let’s tell ‘em we’re in a hurry,” suggested Betty, as she caught up a stone. Running forward she threw it with such good aim that it struck one of the saurians on the head. With a sort of surprised grunt the creature slid off the narrow neck of sand into the water. The other followed with a splash.

“There they go!” cried Mollie. “Come on now, before they take a notion to come back. Oh girls! I’m nearly starved!”

Betty laughed at this—it was characteristic of Mollie, once the immediate stress was removed, to revert to the matter that had previously claimed her attention, and this had been their luncheon.

“Come on!” she cried, and ran toward the main shore.

Betty said afterward that they had never run so fast, not even at the school games, where the outdoor girls had made records for themselves on the cinder track. Just who



reached shore first is a matter of no moment—in fact it must have been a “dead heat,” as Tom Osborne said afterward.

As the girls passed the place where the alligators had been sunning themselves they gave one look each into the water where the saurians had disappeared. One look only, and they did not pause to do that. But they saw no signs of the ugly creatures.

“Safe!” cried Betty, and the girls, breathless from their run, were safe. They gathered about the eatables on the grass.

“Oh, where can Tom be?” cried Betty anxiously. “I—I hope nothing has happened to him!”

“Now who is making direful suggestions, I’d like to know?” asked Grace.

“Well, it is queer to have him disappear that way,” voiced Mollie. “But I’m going to be impolite and—eat.”

She approached the “table,” an example followed by the others. Certainly Tom had done his work exceedingly well. The spread was very inviting.

Betty looked all around the little glade on the edge of the river, where the table was set. There was no sign of their escort. The Gem floated lazily where she was moored, and the scene was quiet and peaceful enough. But there was a certain mystery about the disappearance of Tom Osborne.

“Well, we may as well eat,” sighed Betty. “Then we can look about a bit. There won’t be any alligators inland, I guess.”

Even the fright the girls had experienced had not taken away their appetites, and soon they were making merry over the meal, which was a bountiful one—they could well trust Aunt Hannah for that.

But “between bites,” as it were, Betty and the others looked about for a sign of the young man. He did not appear, however, nor were there any sounds of his approach. The woods back from the river teemed with bird and animal life. The latter was not so visible as the former, for the feathered creatures flitted here and there amid the branches, bursting into various melodious notes.

The meal went on; it was finished. The girls packed up with a little sense of disappointment. They felt that their outing had been rather spoiled. They saved enough for Tom in case he should come back hungry, which would very likely be the case.

“Well, we may as well put things on board,” said Betty, at length. “We can’t stay here much longer. It’s getting late.”

“But can we—ought we—go back without Tom?” asked Mollie.

“I don’t see what else we can do—if he doesn’t come,” said Betty. “We can’t stay here all night.”



The Gem was made ready for the trip back. Then came a time of anxious waiting as the shadows lengthened. Betty, as well as the others, was getting nervous.

“We simply must go,” said the Little Captain, at length. “He will have to come back as best he can. I don’t see what made him go away. I am quite sure Mr. Hammond will not like it.”

“But if we go, can Tom find his way back?” asked Grace.

“He’ll have to. But of course we’ll tell Mr. Hammond, and he, and some of the men, can come for Tom, if they think it necessary.”

There seemed nothing else to do, and presently the girls went aboard, taking the remains of the lunch with them.

“We ought to leave some sort of note for Tom, telling him what happened, and that we couldn’t wait any longer,” suggested Mollie, as Betty was about to start.

“That’s so. I didn’t think of that. We’ll do it.”

“And leave him some lunch, too,” voiced Amy.

“Good!” cried Betty. “Tom has one friend, at least.”

A goodly packet of lunch was done up, and placed in a tree, well wrapped, where it would be sure to be seen. Then a note was left, with a brief account of what had happened, and the information that the girls had gone back to Orangeade.

“He ought to see that!” remarked Betty, stepping back to inspect her handiwork. She had pinned a small square of white paper, containing the writing, to a sheet of light brown manila, so that it was visible for some distance.

“It looks like a whole book—instead of a note,” laughed Mollie.

The Gem was started and began dropping down the branch stream toward the main river. At least the girls hoped it was the main river when they turned into a larger body of water. But as they puffed on, amid the lengthening shadows, an annoying doubt began to manifest itself in Betty’s mind. She glanced at the shores from time to time.

“Girls,” she said finally, “does everything look right?”

“Do you mean—your hair?” asked Amy.

“No, I mean the scenery. Is it familiar? Have we been here before? Did we come this way?”

They all stared at Betty.

“What—what do you mean?” faltered Grace.

“Well, I don’t seem to remember this place,” went on Betty. “I’m afraid we’ve taken the wrong turn in the river, and that—”

“You don’t mean to say that we’re lost; do you?” cried Mollie.

“I’m afraid so,” was Betty’s low-voiced reply.

