

CHAPTER XXIV: THE YOUTH ON THE RAFT

Tom Osborne, on the way back in the Gem with the girls and Mr. Stonington, told his story. He had prepared the luncheon, and, seeing the girls going out on the little neck of land to gather flowers, he recalled seeing some blooms, of the orchid variety, farther in the woods.

Thinking to give the girls a surprise, he decided to gather some before they returned. He set off, but the flowers grew farther away than he thought, and before he realized it he was a mile from the glade.

“Then, all at once,” he related, “a couple of rough fellows sprang out at me, and before I could do anything they had me tied.”

“How awful!” exclaimed Betty.

“I thought so at the time,” said Tom, grimly. “I couldn’t imagine why they wanted me, but when they led me off into the swamp I understood. They were after workers, and they’d do anything to get them.”

Happily the days are past when such things are done, but a few years ago, before the law intervened, men who were making money by getting valuable timber, and other products, from the Southern forests, stopped at little in order to obtain the necessary labor.

Tom was taken to the Everglade camp, which explains why the calls of the girls did not reach him. Strong and healthy, he was a great “find” for the unscrupulous contractors, but as he stubbornly refused to work he was made a prisoner in one of the shacks.

It was there that he got into communication with The Loon. Poor Harry, wandering about in the swamps and forests in search of the young man who, some time previous, had given him money to go for aid for him, came within talking distance of where Tom was locked up. Tom knew the half-witted fellow, and quickly whispered an appeal to him.

“I told him to go back and find you girls,” said Tom, “and tell you why I couldn’t get back. Then I asked him to tell you to get help.”



“And I did,” spoke The Loon, proudly.

“Indeed you did,” declared Tom, patting him on the back.

“I only wish I could have helped the other one,” went on Harry.

“But who was he—can’t you tell his name, or something about him?” asked Mr. Hammond.

The Loon shook his head.

“I forget,” he muttered. “All I know is that I saw him up in the other camp—away off. He gave me money then, and told me to go to someone—I forget who—to send a message over the telegraph wires, you know. He wrote it down, but I lost that and the money. Then I went back, but they had taken him away. I trailed him, though, and found him where I saw Tom. Then I ran to meet you girls. I was afraid, too.”

“You were brave, Harry,” said Mr. Hammond.

“Was I?” asked the simple lad, well pleased.

Tom told more details of his imprisonment; how he heard sounds from an adjoining cabin that would indicate some other unfortunate was held there. He heard the men discussing his case, and planning to force him to work in the morning.

Then had come the rescue.

Through the gathering morning light the Gem proceeded on her way. Tom was at the wheel, having been refreshed by coffee which Betty and Mollie made aboard their craft.

A lookout was kept for any signs of a refugee on the way back to the orange grove, but none was seen.

“He may be hiding in the swamp,” said Mr. Hammond. “He may come out after dark, and make his way to our place. I hope he does.”

“I am going to look for him,” said The Loon.

Poor fellow! In spite of his simple ways, he showed a devotion of which one with a stronger mind might have been proud.

“Can’t something be done for him?” asked Mr. Stonington, nodding in the direction of Harry. “Ought not we to keep him with us?”

“It would be hard work,” answered Mr. Hammond. “He is used to going and coming as he pleases. He wanders all about this region. He is harmless.”

Without further incident the orange grove was reached. Tom Osborne, tired and worn out, received every attention, and was soon himself again. Mr. Hammond communicated with the authorities regarding the men of the camp, but little could be done. There were legal complications hard to avoid.



“But, at any rate,” said Mr. Stonington, “we have rescued Tom, and that other young man has escaped.”

“Perhaps to a worse fate,” observed Mr. Hammond.

Days passed. The outdoor girls enjoyed their life in the orange grove, but Grace fretted because no word came from her brother. He seemed to have disappeared completely.

Following the receipt of a letter from her father, containing no news, Grace was so gloomy that one day Betty proposed a ride in the launch.

“It will do you good,” she said to Grace. “We will take our lunch again, and—”

“Get trapped by alligators or snakes?” suggested Amy.

“No!” declared Mollie. “We’ll take The Loon along, and he will look after us,” for Harry was back from one of his wanderings. He spent much time away from the grove, seeking in many strange places for the young man who had appealed to him for help. But he did not find him.

So the girls went for a little excursion. In spite of the gloom that seemed to hang over them they had an enjoyable time.

They were scanning the shores ahead of them, looking for a suitable place to land and eat their lunch, when Betty, who had taken the wheel, with The Loon to stand beside and direct her steering, uttered a cry and pointed ahead.

“See!” she said. “What is that?”

The other girls looked.

“Some sort of a raft,” answered Mollie.

“And someone is on it!” added Amy.

“It’s a man!” cried Grace. “A young man! Oh, maybe it’s the one who escaped from the Everglade swamp. Hurry to him, Betty!”

As she spoke the figure on the raft rose to his knees, and waved a hand at the girls. Then the youth, for such he was seen to be, toppled over on his rude craft, and went drifting down the current.

