

CHAPTER VI

PLAYING A WAITING GAME

Left alone at the camp, Will and George lay down in the warm, clean sand for a long rest. They heard Sandy and Mickey talking at the motor boat for a moment, and then heard Tommy plunging through the thicket on his way to the same point.

"I believe," Will said, after these sounds had died away, "that I could go to sleep here and not wake up in a week."

"That's just about the way I feel!" George admitted.

"Then why don't we go to sleep?" Will asked with a smile.

"Nothing to prevent it that I know of!" was the answer.

The boys closed their eyes and dozed off. Later on they remembered hearing the birds chirping in the tall palmettos on the rim of the island, and indistinctly the splash of water beneath the strokes of paddles.

Will dreamed that he was back at the Pictured Rocks again. He experienced a feeling of extreme dizziness and imagined himself about to fall from one of the shoulders of the Empress of the Lake, that mysterious lady of stone whose calm face has gazed over the waters of the lake to the north for more centuries than man has any account of.

When he awoke, the dizzy feeling by no means abated, and he opened his eyes with a start to feel himself in the grasp of a giant of a man whose bearded face was pushed to within six inches of his own.

His first instinct was to call to George for assistance, but the first glance told him that his chum was in no better condition to render help than himself.

"Wake up!" shouted a hoarse voice in his ear.

The boy felt a pair of great hands searching his pockets for weapons, and was then tossed to the ground. So powerful were the arms of his assailant that it seemed to him that he had been handled as a child would handle a toy.

Directly George was tossed to his side, and then the two stood looking about while the intruders made free with the tents and everything they contained.

"Welcome to our city!" grinned George.

The outlaws regarded the boy curiously for a moment and then glanced at each other significantly.

"It's gone to his head," one of them said with a hoarse laugh. "We should have brought him out of sleep with a low sweet song."

"That's right," the other answered with a wink. "These kiddos have the appearance of being mama's boys."

"Help yourself to anything you see!" Will exclaimed, as one of the men began filling his pockets with cartridges.

"Surest thing you know!" was the grinning answer.

"What do you want, anyhow?" demanded George in a moment.

"First," one of the outlaws answered, "we want plenty to eat, which, as you see, we are about to get without further ceremony."

"I'm sorry we haven't got a pie to give you!" Will cut in.

"And, next," the fellow went on, "after having filled the aching void within, we want that 'ere motor-boat."

"You don't want much!" exclaimed Will.

"We want all you've got!" the other snarled.

While the men feasted on the provisions which they found in one of the tents, the boys gazed at each other helplessly.

The men ate long and heartily, wasting more than they consumed, and drinking great cups of coffee which, it seemed to the boys, would have scalded any one else.

The situation, was indeed, a serious one. They had not the slightest notion where their chums were. They did not dare look at their watches for fear they would excite the cupidity of the outlaws, but they knew from the position of the sun in the sky that they must have slept for several hours.

They had no means of knowing whether their friends had fallen into the power of the outlaws. They considered such a happening rather improbable, and yet in no other way could they account for their long absence from the camp.

"And now," one of the outlaws said, after

they had gorged themselves with food, "if you lads will kindly come aboard the motor boat and show us how to run it, we'll be much obliged."

"Where are you going?" asked Will.

The fellow answered only with a sullen growl. This was a situation worse than any which the boys had heretofore imagined. The removal of the motor-boat would leave their friends in the deadly Everglades and they, themselves, would be in peril of instant death.

There was no doubt in their minds that they were face to face with the Revells or some of their associates.

President Herrick of the Lake Trust Company had hinted in the letter which had been delivered that very morning that members of the wrecking gang had fled to the Everglades after a particularly atrocious murder.

These men had every appearance of being brutal and desperate, and so the lads had little difficulty in placing them where they belonged.

At last one of the men asked a question which set the minds of the boys at rest on one point. When they were about to leave the camp one of them asked:

"Where are the others?"

"Out fishing!" replied George shortly.

"Sorry," the fellow went on, "but, really, we can't wait for them. Anyhow, they'll have a fine vacation here, waiting for some one to come and get them!"

When the party reached the motor-boat, the two boys being pushed on ahead at the point

of revolvers, the fellows inspected the provision lockers and gasoline tanks like men well accustomed to details of that sort. Then one of them beckoned to Will.

"Start the boat," he said, "and go due west!"

"Where are you going?" asked George.

"After a time to the Key islands," was the reply. "Popular gentlemen like ourselves," he added with a leer, "are often obliged to keep out of the way of their friends."

"If you're going on a long cruise among the Florida Keys," Will urged, "you'd better go back to the camp and get the rest of the provisions. Besides," he went on, "most of our cooking utensils are there."

"That's a good idea!" exclaimed one of the outlaws. "Now, look here, Sam," he went on, "you stay here and watch the boat while I take the lads up to bring down the grub. We probably will need every pound of it before we get where we can buy more."

"Indeed we will!" the other answered. "And look here, Bob," the man who had been called Sam went on, "you may as well bring them shelter tents along with you. The lads can make more than one trip if necessary, only you don't want to let them get away."

Will sprang off the boat nimbly and with a cheerful face. George wondered at the attitude of his friend, but, of course, did not understand exactly what was in his mind. When they reached the camp they began packing such provisions as had been taken ashore into hampers, while Bob set to work on the two tents.

"I think," Will said, pausing in his work a moment, "that there's a whole stack of provisions under that stack of fat pine. I remember putting something under there, but don't recall just now what it was."

"Dump him over, then!" shouted Bob. "We'll take everything in sight."

Will began tossing the fat pitch pine, of which a great heap had been collected, into a pile on the other side of the fire. George stood looking on in amazement, not understanding.

"Make another pile, you idiot," whispered Will, "and throw some on the fire! We want to get four columns of this black smoke pouring into the sky in about five minutes."

"In other words," George whispered, "you want to send a Boy Scout telegram to our chums, telling them to come home?"

"That's the idea!" whispered Will. "Now don't throw all the pine on the piles, but scatter it around a little, so that burly brute won't suspect anything. Throw the wood so the smoke columns will be in a straight line east and west, and then we'll manage to set them afire."

"Great head!" almost snickered George.

"Aw, what have we got Pioneer badges for if we don't know how to do a little thing like that?" asked Will.

Bob had both tents down in a short time, and George was instructed to carry one of them to the boat. The next moment the outlaw picked up the other and started after him. A few yards from the fire he turned back and glared at Will.

"You can't get off the island, you know," he snarled, "and if you should be left here without provisions you'd starve to death, so you may as well help bring the chuck down without being watched."

"I'd rather go with you than be left here alone without anything to eat, so you needn't trouble yourself about my trying to get away."

Plainly satisfied with this reply, Bob turned away and was soon plunging through the thicket on his way to the channel. It took Will only a moment then, to complete the four piles of fat pine and set fire to them.

When Bob returned a moment later he glared at the four blazes suspiciously.

"What's that for?" he demanded.

"I'm not going to gather wood for any one else!" Will replied.

"That's the idea!" Bob answered with a chuckle. "Never do a thing for anybody unless there's something in it for yourself."

"I guess we'll get along together, all right," Will replied, with a smile which was intended to have the appearance of friendliness.

"We'll hit it off together, all right," the fellow snarled, "if you boys behave yourselves. We're going on a little cruise through the Keys, and we'd rather have you with us than not, because, you know," he added, "you can run the boat when people get too inquisitive, and buy provisions when we come to places where we might not be welcome."

"All right!" Will answered cheerfully. "You fellows have the top hand, and we'll be good."

"That's the stuff!" declared Bob.

Seeing that the fires were well started and the heavy black smoke pouring in great volumes into the sky, Will collected an armful of provisions and started through the thicket to the channel. Halfway there he managed to catch his foot in a running vine and fall to the ground, scattering the canned goods hither and yon in the jungle.

It will be understood that the object of the boy was to gain time. He believed that if his chums were anywhere within sight of the signal they would hasten to the island at once. He knew that they were all well armed, and believed that, by some sort of strategy, they could be able to wrest the motor-boat from the outlaws with such help as they, unarmed, might be able to give.

Bob scowled when the cans tumbled into the thicket and began gathering them up. George now came from the motor-boat and, thoroughly appreciating the situation, called out to his chum:

"Where did you leave the money-bag, Will?"

"Didn't any of you fellows get it?" the boy called out.

Bob started for the deserted camp on a run, and the two lads chuckled as they saw him making a hasty examination of the places where the two tents had stood.

"I've got the fires going in great shape," Will explained to George, in a whisper. "Now, if we can just hold these outlaws here until the boys see the 'come home' signal and answer it,

we'll have this boat back in our own hands in no time."

"Do you think they can, operate the boat?" asked George.

"I think they can," was the reply. "They acted rather handy when they went aboard."

"Then," George suggested, "I'll carry a load of this truck down and steal the spark plugs. We can put them back again under compulsion. If the boys come, you know," he went on, "we don't want the Beaver running away from them."

While the boys waited, two quick shots came from the north.