

CHAPTER VII

THE BOY SCOUT SIGNAL

After a long search along the bank of the thicket-grown channel, Tommy and Chet came upon the canoe which had disappeared a short time before. It was plain that the man who had been left at the campfire suffering from an overdose of cayenne pepper had removed the boat from the place where Tommy had left it and hidden it in a sheltered nook for his own use later on.

It was quite evident, too, that the fellow had not left the island after removing the canoe, and this doubtless accounted for the noises which the two boys had heard while engaged in preparing their dinner. In fact, Chet expressed the opinion then that the outlaw had been a permanent resident of the island during the past two weeks, and had lived chiefly on the stolen supplies.

Just why he had not attacked the boy while asleep, and also taken full possession of the shelter and the provisions, it was hard to understand. However, subsequent events showed that the outlaw had been waiting for the return of the lad whom Chet was expecting every day. The fellow believed that the boy would bring in on his return fresh provisions and weapons and ammunition, of which he stood in great

need. Probably the fact that Chet had neither revolver nor cartridges which could be stolen protected him from attack!

While the boys talked they made their way to the middle of the island where Chet had erected his shelter, and where the fire was still burning. When they came within a few yards of the fire they both started forward on a run. The prisoner they had left choking from the effects of his cayenne pepper treatment was not in sight.

The fishline which had secured his ankles lay broken in two sections about where his feet had lain. The enormous strength of the man had been sufficient to rend the line like a cotton thread.

On the opposite side of the fire, and some distance away, there was an agitation in the thicket, and the boys dashed on in that direction. The commotion ceased as they advanced, but birds flying in alarm from that part of the island showed the boys that some unusual thing was taking place there. They hastened on until they came within sight of the channel on the side of the island. Half a dozen yards from shore they saw a head of matted hair bobbing up and down.

"Now who'd 'a' thought it?" asked Chet.

"The fellow's game, all right," Tommy panted, for the run through the thicket had been a fast one. "Why, when we left him he couldn't open his eyes!"

"Well, he's gone anyway!" commented Chet.

"And I'm sorry, too," the boy went on "be-

cause I wanted to put him through the third degree to see if I could find out something about Anse."

"How would he know anything about Anse if he's been on this island ever since you've been here?" demanded Tommy with a wink. "Your stories don't hang together, young fellow!"

"I don't know whether he knows anything about my chum or not," replied Chet, "but it wouldn't have done any harm to question him, if we had been able to keep him a prisoner."

"Shall I wing him?" asked Tommy.

"Wing him?" repeated Chet.

"Sure!" replied Tommy. "I can put a bullet through his arm that will make him stop swimming in about one second!"

"Aw, let him go!" Chet advised. "If he's been on the island as long as I think he has, he doesn't know anything about Anse anyway. Gee!" the boy added with a grin, "I'll bet the cool water feels good to that mug of his!"

"Well," Tommy asked in a moment, "are you going to remain on this island until this chum of yours comes back?"

"Well," replied Chet hesitatingly, "I might leave a note for him and go back with you. Then he could join us when he saw fit."

"It isn't so mighty fine playing Crusoe, is it?" grinned Tommy.

"To tell the truth," replied Chet, "I've been half crazy from loneliness. It's been simply horrible!"

"I don't doubt it."

"Every night I'd hear footsteps, and think

Anse was coming back. Every morning I'd look over the island before breakfast, thinking he might be hiding somewhere to give me a surprise. To tell you the truth, I was about to swim away when you came!"

Leaving a few tins of provisions for use of the boy in case he should return, and also a note explaining where he had gone, Chet, assisted by Tommy, carried the bulk of the provisions down to the canoe and the two pushed out into the channel.

Half a dozen strokes from shore Chet lifted his eyes to the east and gave a quick start of surprise which came very near overturning the canoe. Tommy caught at the sides and regarded his companion half angrily.

"Look there!" shouted Chet.

"If you don't mind what you're doing," replied Tommy, "we'll both be looking up from the bottom of the channel!"

"But look!" cried Chet excitedly.

Tommy straightened up instantly and bent over the starboard side of the canoe. Chet did the same thing at the same instant. The canoe turned turtle, and the boys' heads came up within about a foot of each other, dripping with water.

"Now see what you've gone and done!" shouted Tommy with a grin.

"I needed a bath, anyway!" Chet answered.

"And now," Chet remarked, as the boys pushed off in their canoe again, "perhaps you'll keep your seat in the bottom of the canoe and look up at what's going on over on the island

you've been telling me about—the island where your friends are encamped."

Tommy followed the suggestion and gave a start of surprise which would have overturned the canoe again had he been standing on his feet. What he saw was the Boy Scout signal "Come home," expressed in four columns of black smoke, rising from the fat pine fires.

"There is something going on there!" he declared. "I just believe this part of the Everglades to be swarming with outlaws!" he went on. "When we all get back to camp again, I'm going to vote to spend the rest of our vacation camping in Lincoln Park! This is getting too strenuous for me. I'm getting tired of excitement."

"We couldn't scare you out of the Everglades with a gun!" laughed Chet. "Anyway," the boy continued, "I don't see why you prophecy evil because of that Boy Scout signal."

"They wouldn't put the signal out unless there was need of our immediate presence at the camp," was the reply. "You see," he went on, "Sandy and Mickey were going away about the time I did, so that leaves only Will and George at the camp. For all I know," he went on, "there may be another messenger boy from Chicago with a letter telling about another lost heir!"

Chet gave a gesture of surprise and fixed his eyes keenly upon the speaker.

"What about the lost heir?" he asked, and when Tommy told the story he paid such strict attention, and asked so many questions, that the

canoe was almost in sight of the spot where the motor-boat had been left before the narration was completed.

"We'll see the motor-boat in a minute now!" Tommy exclaimed. "Its right around behind that clump of palmetto trees."

While the boys paddled straight away toward the point indicated two quick shots came from the north. The next instant the sparking of the motors announced that the Beaver was in motion.

"Something funny about that!" Tommy exclaimed. "I don't believe the boys would go away in the motor-boat. Perhaps some gink has dropped down on the island and grabbed the boat. And perhaps," he went on, "that's why the four columns of smoke are calling us home."

"If you think anything of that kind is going on," Chet advised, "just whirl in to the right and we'll keep the canoe out of sight until we find out what's going on. If there's any trouble the thing for us to do is to prevent outlaws removing the boat."