

## CHAPTER XI

### LOST IN THE SWAMP

"It appears to me," Will said, after the departure of the four boys, "that we have been keeping camp most of the time today while the others have been having all the fun."

"We've been keeping camp when the outlaws weren't keeping it for us!" George corrected. "Did you ever see anything like it?" the boy continued. "The way things have been going today?"

"There haven't been very many dull moments, and that's a fact!" replied Will. "First came the letter from Chicago telling of the lost heir; then came a couple of batches of outlaws."

"I hope it's over now," George observed. "We ought to be able to settle down to a good dinner before long."

"Sandy ought to be here with his fish directly," Will continued, "and Tommy ought to have little trouble in getting a couple of ducks. Still," he added, "there's no knowing whether they'll bring in anything or not, so we may as well use up some of the ham and eggs we've been saving for an emergency."

"That's just what I was thinking!" George answered. "You know how it is with those boys. They'll get away fishing and hunting and forget all about the hungry ones at camp."

Anyhow, it will soon be evening, and we can have whatever they bring in for supper."

In accordance with Will's suggestions, the lads prepared an elaborate dinner, looking and listening all the time for the return of their chums. However, as the reader understands, the boys were fully occupied, and so did not make their appearance.

"Now see here, George," Will said, as the meal was completed, "we may as well take a little trip on our own account. It will be dark in about three hours, and we want to see some of the country ourselves."

"The boys have taken the two best canoes!" George replied.

"Then we'll take the Seminole dugout!" Will declared. "We can't make the old ice-wagon go very fast, but she's dry and safe."

"Which way are we going?" asked George as they entered the dugout and paddled into Lost Channel.

"You know the creek Sandy told us about?"

"Where he saw the man and boy in a canoe?"

"Exactly!" Will answered. "Why not take a little spin up there? If there is a boy in captivity in that section we may be able to get track of him."

"Aw, that sounds like the fifteenth century!" replied George. "They don't keep boys in captivity now, any more than they do languishing maidens. That's all bunk! If we find this lost heir at all, we'll find him living with the robbers or the wreckers or the cornfed

natives, whoever they are, of his own free will and accord!"

"Yes, but see here," Will argued, "the lad may have lived with these men of his own free will until we made our appearance. Then you ought to be able to understand exactly what'd he do."

"Sure," answered George. "When we came in with a motor boat, equipped for hunting and fishing, and a gay time generally, he'd naturally want to break away from the old geezers he'd been living with and join us."

"He would if there was anything of the boy about him!" Will continued. "And, naturally, the fellows who brought him in here would want to keep him with them, not because of any love for the kid, probably, but because of a fear that he might talk too much if he got beyond their control."

"You're correct, I think," George agreed. "Come to think of it, you've got it figured out about right!"

The boys paddled nimbly along until they came to the half-concealed mouth of a small creek opening to the east. After inspecting the landscape in a casual manner they turned in under the overhanging boughs and bushes and pushed the canoe through the swamp grass to a cleared channel a few yards from the shore of the body of water they had just left.

"We've found it the first thing!" cried George exultantly.

Will assented, but, as a matter of fact, they had not found the creek they sought at all.

At that moment, Sandy and Chet were fishing at the mouth of the creek which had been explored earlier in the day. When George and Will pushed on to the east into a country where lagoons and lakes covered most of the swampy soil, Tommy and Chet were fishing at the mouth of the other stream, as stated above.

After paddling for an hour, Will sat flat down in the bottom of the dugout and wiped the perspiration from his streaming face.

"Have you seen any lost heirs yet?" he asked of George, with a grin.

"I didn't expect to meet any lost heirs!" was the reply. "But I'll tell you what I did expect to find," he continued, "and that's just what we've butted into!"

"What's the answer," asked Will.

"I expected that we'd find a channel leading into the wilderness which showed signs of frequent use, and that's just what we've done! This stream is often used, all right!"

"Well, have we gone far enough?" asked Will. "The sun is getting pretty low, and it will be dark in a little over an hour."

"I'm ready to go back," replied George.

Accordingly the dugout was headed downstream, and the boys proceeded at a swifter pace. Before they had passed half the distance to Lost Channel the sun dropped down behind the tangle of palmettos and pines, and a heavy twilight lay over the swamp.

"I don't like this!" Will exclaimed.

"I don't think we'll have any trouble in finding our way," consoled George. "It would

be a rotten thing to get lost in this swamp just now, wouldn't it?" he continued, with an apprehensive look.

"I don't see how we can get lost as long as we know the points of the compass," Will suggested.

"In about a half an hour, we won't be able to know the points of the compass!" George declared. "We've got to get out of here before that!"

The boys pushed on for a few moments more, and then Will pushed his paddle into a group of bushes and faced his chum.

"Do you remember that clump of underbrush with the palmetto growing exactly in the middle of it?" he asked.

"No," was the reply, "but then, you know I can't remember every feature of the landscape on the stream."

"Well, I'll tell you one thing right now," Will exclaimed, "that we never passed this place on the way up! I've been watching for ten minutes for a familiar tree or bend, and nothing of the kind has shown up!"

"And that means," George added gravely, "that we're lost!"

"That's the size of it!"

"Well, the thing to do is to turn back and try to find the creek!"

"Creeks and bayous all look alike now," Will answered, swinging a hand over the rapidly darkening landscape.

"Then we may as well be paddling back as to be paddling ahead!" George argued. "We

know that we're off our course, and we can't be in any worse fix if we do stumble into another bayou instead of into the creek. Anyhow, that's the way it looks to me!"

The boys paddled back to what appeared to them to be east for some moments, and then swept into a mud bank which effectually prevented further progress. Will tried to push the prow off with his paddle but succeeded only in stirring a collection of lizzards and small snakes out of their nests. It was now quite dark.

"It's a good thing we tackled the ham and eggs before leaving camp!" George suggested. "We're likely to spend the night in this blooming old swamp. Of course, we had to get up against something hard on our first trip out!" he continued, with a grin at Will's disconsolate face.

"Don't talk about anything to eat!" the other wailed. "I was just thinking of Tommy coming in with his ducks and Sandy coming in with his fish! Say, kiddo," he continued, "that little old motor boat would look mighty good to me just now!"

"What is it we've run into?" asked George, in a moment.

"Mud bank!" was the reply.

"The end of the bayou, of course!"

"The only question now," Will grinned, "is which end?"

As he spoke he took out his electric searchlight and turned the round flame on the prow of the boat and the black swamp ahead.

In a moment the illumination was turned off and he was clutching George hopefully by the arm.

"Say!" he said, almost in a whisper, "there's a little amateur log causeway runs through the mud on the shore, and I'll just bet we've struck some place where we can get supper, and also find out how to get back to Lost Channel! I guess this isn't so worse!"

"How do we know we haven't come upon the home of some of the wreckers or swamp robbers?" asked George. "They would be apt to hide in just such a place as this!" he added, trying to push the dugout back into the bayou.

"I'm going to find out, anyway," Will insisted. "There!" he cried in a moment. "Do you see the light of that fire among the trees? Just you wait until I come back and I'll tell you all about it!"

The boy disappeared in the darkness and George sat anxiously awaiting his return.