

CHAPTER XII

A RACE IN THE NIGHT

Before Will had proceeded very far he saw that the fire which had attracted his attention burned before the open doorway of a hut which had been roughly constructed of palmetto trunks. The light of the blaze, flickering into the opening, revealed the figure of a boy lying on the floor which appeared to be of logs laid close together.

Will listened intently for a long time, but heard no sound indicating the presence there of anyone save the person in sight. Then, turning away to the left, and keeping beyond the circle of the firelight, he passed through a thicket and a mudhole, which cased him with dripping black soil to his knees, and came out at the rear of the hut.

There was no window or door of any kind in the blank wall, but the logs were not fitted tightly together, and the lad could see nearly the entire interior through the interstices.

The boy he had observed still lay where he had first seen him, and as he looked closer he saw that the lad's legs were bound together by a rope, the ends of which were knotted around a log in the front wall. Making sure from his point of observation that the boy was the only occupant of the hut, he put his lips to the opening and called out softly:

"Hello, there, boy!"

The lad's head turned from side to side, but it was evident that he was unable to make much of a change in his position.

"All alone?" Will asked.

"Come on in!" was the reply.

"Anybody else there?" persisted Will.

"No," answered the other, "but there may be before long."

Will hastened back around to the front of the house, dodging the objectionable slough this time, and passed in at the open doorway.

His first act was to cut the rope which held the boy in his uncomfortable position. Then he glanced keenly about the place.

There was no furniture except such as had been made of logs and saplings. The table, a couple of rude benches, and a bunk clumsily built against the wall constituted the entire list of conveniences.

While Will looked about, flashing his searchlight into the corners **not** reached by the blaze outside, the boy arose **slowly** to his feet and stretched his arms and legs like one who had been so long confined in an uncomfortable position.

When Will at last turned his searchlight upon the lad's face he saw that he was pale and emaciated, and clad in garments fully as ragged and uncouth as those in which Chet had appeared.

"What's the idea?" Will asked, pointing to the severed rope.

"I tried to get away!"

"Were you in the canoe this morning?"

The boy nodded.

"Why don't they let you go?" Will went on.

"Just meanness, I guess!" was the reply.

"How long have you been here?" was the next question.

"I don't know!" was the reply. "This isn't a good place to keep track of time."

"Well," Will suggested, after a short hesitation, "of course I'm anxious to know all about it before helping you away, but at the same time this isn't any good place for conversation. The fellows who tied you up so neatly may be back at any time."

"That's right!" replied the boy.

"Then come on!" Will advised. "Let's get a move on."

The two started out of the cottage, but the boy turned back and took a small tin box from the floor and placed it in a pocket, then he joined Will beyond the rim of firelight.

"How did you get here?" he whispered.

"Canoe!" was the reply.

"Is it at the landing?"

"I left it there," was the reply.

"Then," suggested the other, "we'd better be getting back to it. When the chaps who inhabit the hut return, they will land directly at the causeway, so we'd better be getting the canoe out of sight."

The two boys made their way along the faint path which led to the top of the bayou, keeping

out of the line of the fire, until the place where the dugout had been left came into view.

"There it is!" exclaimed Will. "Down there to the left!"

"Oh, there's some one in it!"

"Of course! I didn't come here alone."

"But what's he going away for?" asked the lad.

Will sprang forward as the question was asked, for the dugout was indeed moving down the bayou.

The strange lad kept pace with him for a moment, and then laid a detaining hand on his shoulder.

"There were two with you?" he asked.

"Only one!" answered Will.

"Well, there are two in that dugout!"

"There can't be!" insisted the other.

"There certainly are!" argued the strange boy. "When the fire blazed up a moment ago and the canoe passed the opening in the shore line of bushes, I saw two figures distinctly. One was paddling and the other was sitting at the stern of the boat."

Clasping hands in order that they might not lose each other in the darkness, the boys made their way through the thicket along the shore of the bayou. It was rough traveling, for in many places the vines which clustered about the undergrowth blocked their way.

The swamp seemed alive with sounds as they scrambled along. Nightbirds, alarmed at the sudden clamor, called to each other from distant treetops, and flew away with loudly-

flapping wings. Small creatures of the thickets peered forth from hiding places with keen and watchful eyes for an instant and then disappeared.

Try as they might the two lads found themselves unable to keep up with the pace set by the dugout. The boat was not in sight, of course, owing to the darkness, but its position could readily be established by the soft swish of the paddles.

At last the lads drew up at the edge of an intersecting bayou and stood, panting and discouraged, as the sound of the paddles passed out of hearing. While they listened the sound of an approach was heard.

"I guess it's all up for tonight!" the stranger declared.

"But we can't stay here in the swamp all night!" Will argued.

"We'll have to, if we can't get out!" replied the other.

"And, besides," Will went on, excitedly, "there's no knowing what the fellow who stole the dugout will do to George, and while we're gone some one may come and steal the motor boat. I tell you we've just got to get out of here tonight!"

"I'm willing," replied the other, coolly.

"Do you know which way is west?" asked Will.

"Certainly!" was the reply. "I know where Lost Channel is, too, if you want to go there! Is that where your camp is?"

"Yes," was the answer. "Do you think you can find the channel tonight?"

"I certainly can," was the reply. "But we never can get to it without a boat! The swamp is full of deep sloughs, and the sloughs are full of poisonous snakes. It's a wonder we haven't been eaten alive already."

Will caught the boy by the arm and whispered a word of caution in his ear. He heard some one coming nearer, and also heard the boy chuckling.

"That's old Gregg!" the lad said. "He heard us coming through the thicket and followed. All we have to do to get rid of him is to hide in one of the dark holes and keep still."

"Who's old Gregg?" asked Will.

"Old Gregg's the steward," was the reply. "He came here with us, and was assigned the pleasant duty of keeping track of me. The Revells'll break his neck if I go away!"

"The Revells, eh?" exclaimed Will. "Say, kid," he added, "what's your name?"

"John Smith!" was the reply.

"No joke, now!" Will insisted. "What is it?"

"John Smith, I tell you!"

"How long has it been John Smith?"

"Well," was the answer, "I can remember the time when it was something else, but I don't remember what it was!"

"Think it over!" advised Will. "It may be for your interest to do so."

"Well, this is no time to tell you the story of my life!" chuckled the other. "All we've

got to do now is to keep out of old Gregg's way!"

"And get back to camp!" advised Will.

"What I can't make out," the boy who called himself John Smith said, in a moment, "is about the dugout. I don't understand who it could have been that paddled it away."

"Say," Will exclaimed, as the boy ceased speaking, "there ought to be a boat in this vicinity right now!"

"What makes you think so?"

"Well, how did the fellow who took away the dugout get here if he didn't come in a boat? And where did this man Gregg come from if he didn't come in a boat? The chances are that the two came together in a canoe of some kind and geezled George. Then one of them went to the hut to see if you were still properly tied up, and the other paddled away with my chum. That's the way I size it up!"

"I guess you've got it right," John replied. "They must have come up the bayou in a boat, and the boat must be somewhere near the landing. They might hide it on seeing your chum there in the dugout, but we can find it, even if they did."

"If this Gregg person doesn't interfere with us," suggested Will.

"Which he does right now!"

Will felt a pair of thin arms passed around his body in an attempt to throw him to the ground. He could see only indistinctly, but he noted that John had disappeared in the thicket, and that the man who held him carried the face of an elderly person.

Will was remarkably strong and agile for a youth of his years, and in a moment the struggle in the thicket became desperate. The boy sensed in a moment that his opponent was loosening his hold evidently with the intention of reaching for a weapon. Redoubling his efforts, he managed to bring him to the ground, and the two lay there, panting, until some heavy object whizzed by the boy's ear and struck full on the face below.

Immediately the struggling form became quiet, and Will arose with a little shiver of horror as he felt blood springing from a wound.

"Did I knock him out?" asked John's voice.

"I should think so!" answered Will. "I guess you killed him!"

"You can't kill Gregg with a two inch club!" the boy answered. "And even if I did kill him," he went on, "it's better to be him than me."

Will arose and turned the light of his electric on the figure lying before him. There was only a slight wound on the temple, and as they bent over, the eyes opened and looked dazedly about.

"Got you that time, didn't we, Gregg?" asked John.

"You know what they'll do to you now!" snarled the other.

"They'll have to catch me first!" replied the boy.

Gregg moved as if to regain his feet, but Will pressed him back to the ground. The old man's eyes glittered but he said nothing.

"We've got to get rid of him in some way," Will declared. "We'll have to tie him up, or

beat him up, or do something to hold him until we get away in the boat!"

"Chuck me in the hut and tie me up!" advised Gregg.

"He takes it coolly," suggested Will.

However, the boys started to carry out the suggestion. Gregg walked back to the hut quite willingly, and offered no resistance when the boys began tying him with the rope which had been cut a short time before.

"Now get out!" said Gregg, after the tying was completed.

"We'll get out fast enough!" declared John.

Gregg snarled and looked into their faces with cunning eyes, for the sound of voices was now heard coming up the bayou.