

CHAPTER XIII

THE WAY OF AN INDIAN

The darkness grew deeper as George waited in the dugout for the return of his chum. The wild, uncanny loneliness of the swamp brought a little chill of terror as he listened for some sound indicating the lad's return.

The blaze in front of the open door, although quite a distance away, seemed for a time like a friendly beacon to the watcher. Strain his eyes as he might, however, he could distinguish no signs of life in or about the hut. Only for the flare of the flames, the place might have been a thousand miles removed from the haunts of human beings.

Although the lad listened intently and watched the growing shadows with apprehensive eyes, he felt a pull at the boat before he became aware of the presence of any one in his vicinity!

His first move was to draw his automatic and searchlight, but before either was called into action a voice he had heard before reached his ears. No words were spoken. It was only the low guttural grunt of the Seminole.

"Okee!" he whispered softly.

The only reply was a horse ejaculation which seemed to command silence. Without further comment Okee began drawing the boat away from the landing, using his paddle softly and with great dexterity.

"Wait!" whispered George. "Will is ashore!"

"Bad man come!" was the only reply.

"See here, Okee!" the boy protested. "You mustn't take this dugout away just now. I've got to wait here until Will comes back!"

Regardless of George's expostulations the Indian continued to draw the boat away. A few yards from the landing he stepped softly into the dugout, holding the line of his own canoe in one hand until he passed it to the boy. Half angry at the Seminole's imperative methods, George was about to utter a vigorous protest when the sound of voices came from below. They grew louder as he listened.

"Hide boy! Hide boat!"

This language was at least capable of interpretation under the circumstances, and George remained quietly as the Indian wheeled the dugout into a grassy bight and sat calmly down in the bottom.

George bent forward to ask for some explanation, but the Indian checked him with a gesture which was felt and not seen in the darkness.

They remained under cover for what seemed to the boy to be a long time. They heard the approaching boat coming nearer. Now and then it seemed to come to a halt while the occupants engaged in excited conversation.

"I don't care what you say," a heavy voice exclaimed in a moment, "it is a sure thing that some one has been using this passage!"

"There probably isn't a person on earth save

ourselves who knows anything about this bayou!" was the answer.

"How do we know that the Indians have not been here?" demanded the first speaker. "They are on the warpath again. That's a sure thing! The conduct of the one we saw convinces me of that!"

"I don't think there are a dozen Seminoles in the Everglades!" was the reply. "What few there are are scattered!"

"You saw the man yourself!" angrily exclaimed the other. "You heard him call to his warriors. It strikes me that you ought to have sense enough to realize that we are more in danger from an Indian uprising than from anything else."

The men argued back and forth for some time, and then a third voice broke in, speaking in a dictatorial tone:

"We've had enough of this!" the voice said. "The point you are arguing can be easily settled when we arrive at the landing."

Sitting close to the Seminole, George thought he detected a low chuckle which sounded almost like laughter coming from the dusky form at his side. Of course the boy, not having been on the island at the time, was in ignorance of the incident now being discussed.

"Okee," the boy whispered then, in spite of the Indian's protest, "we've just got to go back on shore and find Will!"

"No talk!" was the only answer received from the Indian.

"But look here!" urged George. "There'll be

no show of getting him away after all those fellows land!"

As the boy ceased speaking there came a great crashing in the thicket, and the hard breathing of persons overexerting themselves reached his ears. Again he urged the Indian to land with a view of ascertaining if his chum was in that vicinity.

Presently the boy saw Will and a lad who was a stranger to him step out into the circle of light and dodge away in their direction. As they did so, the Seminole glided forward. George was about to follow, and would have gone regardless of consequences, only that Okee turned and motioned him back. After running a few paces toward the spot where George lay hidden, the two boys turned toward the landing.

As they did so the voices which George had listened to, and which Gregg had discerned a moment before, broke the silence.

No words were distinguishable but the boys who were running and the boy who was waiting and listening with his heart in his mouth, knew that the speakers were sweeping toward the landing with all the speed their paddles could give.

"Will isn't much of a Boy Scout!" George muttered, "and not deserving of the Stalker medal, if he doesn't keep away from the landing after that!"

The next moment, Will proved that the Stalker medal had been worthily conferred by darting down the bayou. Half a dozen paces

from the point where he had turned he came full upon Okee, upon whose dusky face the fire was casting an uncertain light.

The boy who had given his name as John Smith saw the Indian, too, and a cry of terror arose to his lips. Only for the fact that the Indian seized the trembling lad and silenced him with a hand pressed over his lips, the exact location of the group would have been revealed the next instant.

John struggled manfully in the grasp of the Seminole, but without avail. In the meantime, Will was trying to explain to him that the Indian was not there on a hostile mission, and that he was only asking for silence.

George was about to rush forward when the three advanced into the thicket where he lay. Instead of stopping there, however, Okee kept steadily on, passing through the thicket as a shadow might have passed, and so clearing the way for others by pressing back branches and bushes that the progress was almost noiseless.

George sprang to Will's side as the boy came up, and the Indian clung to the third lad, evidently with the intention of making sure that no outcry should escape him. As the little party pressed on through the thicket they heard the sound of oaths and the trampling of heavy feet at the hut. Then, glancing over his shoulder, George saw one of the recent arrivals snatch a blazing brand from the fire and run at full speed toward the landing. In a moment the fellow called out:

"If they brought a boat, it isn't here now!"

"Then it's easy to see how they got away!" came back from the hut.

By this time the four were nearing the place where the two dugouts had been left. Momentarily expecting pursuit along the bank as well as by way of the bayou, they all crouched down in the thicket. However, the pursuers had no thought of searching the bank of the bayou. Instead, they sprang into the boat in which they had arrived and turned toward the creek which led to Lost Channel.

There was absolute silence in the group of watchers as the boat shot by. In a moment Okee arose, passed along the shore for a few paces and then returned and entered the dugout. John was motioned to a seat on the bottom of the boat, and Will and George took possession of the dugout they had brought away from the island.

"Say!" George whispered to Will, as they paddled swiftly along, both resting their knees on the bottom of the boat, "what kind of an examination would Okee pass if he should apply to the Boy Scouts in Chicago for a Stalker's medal?"

"I guess he'd go some!" whispered Will.

"I wonder how he came to start out after us, and how he knew where to come?" was George's next comment.

"I guess we'll have to put him through the third degree to find that out," was the reply, "for Okee isn't much of a talker!"

"He ought to have a gold medal a foot square!" returned George.

"Of course," Will went on, "we might have been able to get out of that mixup without him, but I don't believe it!"

"Who's your friend?" asked George, a moment later.

Will chuckled softly at the remembrance of the fright which John had experienced on the appearance of the Indian.

"Say, that kid was scared half to death when Okee showed up!" he declared. "He was getting ready to let out a yell which could have been heard at Jacksonville when the Indian grabbed him and shut off his wind."

"But who is he?" insisted George.

"That's John Smith!"

"Quit your foolishness!"

"Well, he said his name was John Smith, anyhow!" Will insisted. "I found him tied up on the floor of a hut. We'll have to get the story of his life after we get back to camp."

"Gee!" whispered George. "Suppose he should be the lost heir!"

The conversation was here interrupted by the dugout bumping softly into the boat ahead. Directly they knew that the prow of their craft was being turned toward the shore, and in a moment they heard the sound of voices further down the bayou.

"Do you mind that?" asked George.

"They're coming back!" suggested Will.

"And Okee is foxy enough to look for a hiding place!"

The boat containing the three men passed up the bayou before long, keeping close to the

opposite bank, then the two dugouts were put in motion again. A few moments later, in changing his position in the canoe, George brought his paddle with a crash against the prow.

The sound echoed up and down the bayou, and the boys knew that their pursuers must have heard it. They heard an exclamation of disgust from the Indian, and the lead boat shot swiftly away.

The lads now paddled with all their strength, for they heard the pursuers closing up on them. The three men were using a light canoe, and the strength of three pair of arms was rather too much for the weaker efforts of the two boys.

"I guess I've done it now!" George said.