

CHAPTER XIV

SEARCHING AT NIGHT

"It's all right to give Will and George a chance to do a turn in the limelight," Tommy declared as the boys seated themselves on the deck of the motor boat, "but I don't like the idea of their being lost in the swamp in the night!"

"If you take my advice," Sandy observed, "we'll go and get the provisions from the island, cook the fish I left there, and start out on a rescuing expedition. And we'd better eat supper on board the motor boat, at that. Things are getting too thick on shore!"

"Say," giggled Tommy, giving Sandy a poke in the ribs, "how do you like this for a nice quiet little Boy Scout vacation?"

"It looks pretty good to me!" Sandy answered. "We've been lost, every one of us, by turns, and been chased by beachcombers and pirates, and we've fought alligators, and got a message from Chicago, and found a Boy Scout doing the Crusoe act on a lonely island!"

It was finally agreed that they should bring the camp equipage and the provisions to the motor boat and start out in quest of the missing boys. Supper was to be cooked on board.

The tents were taken down for the second time that day and, also for the second time

that day, packed on board the motor boat. What few provisions had been taken on shore were removed, and then the boys busied themselves preparing supper.

"I'll tell you what it is, boys!" Sandy declared, as he worked away at the motors, which, it will be remembered, had been flooded by Will in order to prevent the outlaws running away with the boat, "I think we'd better anchor out in Lost Channel until we get ready to leave. There seems to be something going on every minute here, and I'm just pining for a few brief minutes of freedom from care!"

The motors, having been flooded as stated, it required considerable time to get them into working order again. However, by continual cranking, the superfluous gasoline was finally worked out of the cylinders. By the time the supper dishes had been put away, and the boys were ready to start out on their cruise after their chums, night had fallen.

"Now which way shall we go?" asked Tommy, as the boat was brought about in the channel.

"About as good a way as any, I should think," Chet answered, "would be to run up and down the channel and neighboring creeks with lights burning. The motors can be heard for a long distance, and the acetylene searchlight, if directed upward, can be seen for a mile or more above the jungle. If we can't find the boys, they may be able to find us. They'll hear the motors sing, anyway!"

The Beaver was sent up and down the channel for several turns, and then out toward the inland

lake which led, by a succession of large and small bodies of water, in the direction of Webster lake. During the travels of the motor boat the boys kept constant watch for signals from the shore.

It did not seem possible to them that their chums could be beyond the sound of the motors or the illumination of the searchlight. When, after many trips, nothing had been seen of the boys it was generally conceded that they had become involved in trouble with some of the outlaws of the Everglades.

"I'll bet you boys the Masonic Temple against the Park Row station," Mickey spoke up, after a time, breaking a rather intense silence, "that Okee knows more about where the boys are than we do."

"I guess that's no dream!" Tommy declared. "You couldn't get a bet on that from any of us!"

"Now I begin to understand why the Seminole made such a quick exit from the island without waiting for supper!" Sandy exclaimed.

"I don't see how the Indian would be able to find the boys," Chet observed. "He just came in from Webster lake, didn't he?"

"That's a wise old Indian!" Mickey declared. "He's acted as guide for hunters and fishermen in this section of Florida for a great many years, and knows every bayou and lagoon and swamp within three hundred miles of Lake Okeechobee. He told me all about his trips on the way in."

"You surely made a hit with that Indian!" declared Sandy.

"You watch me take him back to Chicago!" laughed Mickey.

As the evening advanced, the boys thought more and more of the possibility of assistance from the Seminole. They remembered that he had circled the island in quest of the boys, and had reported the disappearance of the dug-out. They remembered, too, that he had watched the three intruders with keen and searching glances, and that he had noted with great deliberation the direction taken by them when they left the island.

"If you get him up to Chicago," Tommy remarked, "we'll establish a school of forestry, and put him in charge of it! I guess he could tell the Boy Scouts how to build fires and cross streams and catch wild game!"

"You needn't guess again!" laughed Mickey.

It must have been somewhere near ten o'clock when the motor boat was brought to a stop at the mouth of the little creek which Sandy and Chet had investigated earlier in the day. It was now very dark, a heavy mass of clouds shutting out even the light of the stars, but the searchlight revealed objects some distance up the stream.

"Shall we go on up?" asked Tommy. "We can get up a short distance anyway, and then back out if we have to!"

Before anyone could answer the question a single pistol shot came from the north and west.

"That's in answer to our searchlight!" exclaimed Tommy.

Then followed a succession of shots, and the boat was turned hastily about and pushed up the channel.

"Wait a minute!" cried Chet, as the boat came to the mouth of the stream which the boys had mistaken for the one traversed by Sandy and Chet in the morning. "It seems to me the shooting comes from this bayou!"

"And here come two canoes showing search-lights!" Sandy exclaimed, peering under the overhanging branches. "And Okee is in the first one!"

"And there's a big canoe in pursuit!" yelled Tommy.

"Go it, kids!" cried Mickey. "Get under our guns!"