

CHAPTER XVI

A MIDNIGHT CANOE RIDE

Probably the most astonished person on board the motor boat as the Indian and Mickey disappeared in the darkness was the boy who had given his name as John Smith. He stood for a long time looking into the swamp which the two had entered and then turned to Will with a frightened face. His voice actually trembled when he spoke.

"They'll be murdered!" he declared.

"Don't you ever think that Seminole will ever get the worst of it!" argued Tommy. "He knows just what he's about!

"I reckon," Sandy cut in, "that Okee is next to his underclothing most of the time. He's a wise old fellow."

"Say," George exclaimed in a moment, addressing Will, "we know where that hut is, supposing we go and see what's doing."

"Not for me!" replied Will. "We came near leaving our bones there on the former trip. We never would have gotten out only for Okee!"

"I'm game to go!" exclaimed Chet.

"No, you don't!" replied Will.

"Oh, I don't want to go way up to the hut!" George exclaimed. "I just want to paddle up in a canoe far enough to see the Seminole

and Mickey in action. Besides, you know," he added with a wink, "Okee helped us, and we might be able to help him."

"Nothing doing!" declared Will.

"And he's scoutmaster," grinned Tommy, "and that goes!"

As Tommy spoke he walked over to where Chet sat, and the two engaged in earnest conversation in whispers for some moments.

"Now look here, Tommy," Will warned the boy. "Don't you go to planning any midnight excursions. I brought you out of Chicago on a nice, pleasant, peaceful Boy Scout vacation," he went on with a grin, "and I mean to deliver you in one package at that furnished room on Washington boulevard when I go back! You stay right on board this boat tonight!"

"Of course!" declared Tommy, with a wink at Chet.

"If he tries to get away," laughed Chet, "I'll set a catfish on him."

"The thing for us all to do," Will declared, "is to go to bed. We can anchor in the middle of the channel and sleep without setting a watch."

"And those Revells in the neighborhood?" demanded Tommy.

"The Seminole and Mickey will take care of them," suggested Sandy.

"We don't know whether they will or not," Tommy argued. "You boys may go to sleep if you want to, but Chet and I will keep watch until Okee and Mickey return."

"You won't run away?" asked Will

"Sure not!" replied both boys in a breath.

"If we had plenty of sleeping accommodations, I'd lock you both in the cabin!" declared Will.

"But there's six on board and only four sleeping places!" grinned Tommy. "So Chet and I will bunk out on deck and take turns standing guard while you boys sleep."

This plan was agreed to and Will, George, Sandy and John were soon in the land of dreams. It had been a strenuous day, and the boys were not apprehensive of danger that night, so they dropped asleep the moment their heads touched the pillows.

"Now go on and tell me about it," Tommy said to Chet, as soon as the two boys were alone.

"Well," Chet began, "when we came out of the mouth of the bayou in the motor boat, I thought I saw a canoe disappearing in the direction of the island where you found me."

"Do you think it was Anse?" asked Tommy.

"There were two in the boat," Chet went on, "and that made me think for a time that the fellows were strangers, but the more I consider the proposition the stronger becomes my belief that Anse is back on the island. I think we ought to go and see anyway."

"He'd find your note, wouldn't he?" demanded Tommy. "And go on back to our old camp?"

"Yes," Chet admitted, "he'd find the note and paddle back to your old camp only to find it deserted. If he heard the song of the motors, he'd think there was a mixup between the officers and the outlaws and keep out of sight."

So," the boy went on, "if he is back, he's on the island where he left me."

"Why not run up in the motor boat?" demanded Tommy.

"We might not find him if we went there in force!" laughed Chet.

"Well, who's this other party with him?" Tommy asked.

"We may be able to find that out after we get to him."

Having decided that they ought to visit the island where Chet had been discovered, the boys untied the line of one of the Oldtown canoes and let themselves softly down into it.

"Don't make any noise!" warned Tommy. "We don't want Will to know we're leaving the motor boat. He wouldn't be able to stop us, of course, but the fact that we're away might keep the boys awake most of the night, or until we return, at least."

"I don't think we've got anything on Will when it comes to getting into a scrape," chuckled Chet. "If Okee hadn't picked him out of the mess up at the hut, he'd be there yet!"

"I guess that's no fairy tale!" Tommy answered.

It was still dark, the clouds hanging low and effectually shutting out any gleam of light which might lie above. There would be a moon later on, but unless the clouds broke away the swamps would be clothed in darkness until daylight.

The boys paddled steadily for at least an

hour. Then they came to the landing where the motor boat had lain in the morning.

The bald white peak of the island was deserted. The fire which Will and George had used for cooking about the middle of the afternoon had died entirely out. The three piles of ashes from which the signal fires had sent up their warning were slowly scattering under the influence of a soft gale from the south. The searchlights used by the boys showed no sign of life except that of the air and the jungle.

"If Anse came here tonight in response to the message I left," Chet observed, as the two boys sought their canoe again, "he left nothing to show for his visit."

"You think he'd go back to our old camp?" asked Tommy.

"Where else would he go?"

"I don't know anything about that!" replied Tommy. "But I do know that you're making a great mystery out of nothing. Why wouldn't the boy come to us when he heard the motors? Why would he go off and hide himself on a lonely island with boys scattered all through the swamp?"

"What's the use of asking questions?" demanded Chet.

"Is the boy afraid of being arrested?" continued Tommy. "What's he been doing? Seems to me he's acting mighty funny."

"You'll know all about it in time!" Chet answered. "Just keep your temper for a few hours."

In half an hour the boys were at the island

where, as Tommy expressed it, Chet had done the Robinson Crusoe stunt for two lonely weeks. When they drew up to the shore, not far from the place where Tommy had landed earlier in the day, they were greatly surprised at seeing a fire blazing up in front of the hut which the boy had constructed.

"He's there all right!" exclaimed Tommy.

"And he's got some one with him!" Chet added.

There were two figures moving about in front of the blaze, apparently frying fish for supper.

"Here's another midnight feast!" laughed Tommy.

"I guess they had to catch the fish before they could get much of a supper!" laughed Chet. "You know we only left a few cans of provisions and a little coffee!"

"Didn't Anse go out to Webster lake to get provision?" demanded Tommy.

"Of course he did!" replied Chet. "But we don't know whether he brought any back with him or not!"

"You missed your calling!" grinned Tommy. "You ought to go down on Clark street and enter a dime museum as the mysterious lady! You've a mystery of some kind eating out of your hand every second!"

"What's gone wrong now?" demanded Chet.

"Why wouldn't he bring back provisions if he went to Webster lake after them?" asked Tommy scornfully. "I don't believe he went to Webster lake at all," the boy went on, "and

I don't believe you ever stayed on this island alone for two weeks!"

"Then you must think I'm an awful liar!" laughed Chet.

"No," replied Tommy, "I only think you're soaked up to your chin in mystery!"

"If you're a good little boy," Chet answered with unfailing good humor, "you'll soon know all about it! Talk about the village sewing circle," the boy continued, "why, you've got more curiosity in your system than all the gossipy sewing circles in the state of Maine."

When the boys landed and walked toward the fire they were greeted with cries of welcome from the two who had been working before the embers, trying to fry about five pounds of fish in a skillet intended to hold only two. They all flocked back to the shelter together.

"I see you got him!" exclaimed Chet, pointing to a rather neatly dressed boy who seemed to be an entire stranger to Chet, and who now stood looking upon the little group with an approving smile.

"Yes," answered Anse, a boy not far from Chet's size and almost as roughly dressed. "I got the right boy this time!"

Tommy glanced from one to the other for a moment and turned to pour himself a cup of steaming coffee.

"You fellows make me tired!" he said. "First thing, you know, I'll be writing a book about you and your mysteries!"

Chet and Anse chuckled softly and the stranger, who had been introduced as Bert

Snyder, laughed heartily as he held out a cup for Tommy to fill. Tommy gazed at him critically and asked:

"Did you just come from Webster lake?"

"No!" was the reply. "I just came from a hiding place in the swamp!"

"How did you leave the Revells?" asked Tommy with a wink at Chet.