

Boy Scouts in the Everglades

or

The Island in Lost Channel

CHAPTER I

HUNTING FOR A FISHING POLE

Tommy Gregory, Beaver Patrol, Boy Scouts of America, Chicago, was hunting for a fishpole in an island in Lost Channel.

Lost Channel is a body of water in that part of Florida known as the Everglades. It is in Dade county, and lies between Lake Okechobee and Barnes Sound, which is separated from the Atlantic ocean only by the pointing finger of the Florida Keys.

While Tommy searched for his fishpole in the land of pitch pine and palmetto, Charley Green, known to his intimate friends as Sandy Green, sat in a canoe in Lost Channel and laughed at him.

"Think of streams and lakes swarming with fish," Tommy exclaimed, half-angrily, "and no poles!"

"Why don't you cut a pitch pine pole?" demanded Sandy.

Tommy cast a withering glance at his chum and continued his quest of something to which a line might be attached. The humor of the lad's suggestion will be appreciated when it is

stated that the pitch pine trees of Florida are from three to five inches in diameter when they are long enough for fishpoles!

"If you'll just wait a couple of minutes," Sandy stated, in a patronizing tone, "I'll go and get you a palmetto pole!"

The island sat in Lost Channel like a bald-headed man with a fringe of hair about his ears.

As Tommy pushed his way through the last tangle of undergrowth and came out on the bald spot, two boys arose from a canvas spread on the warm sand and beckoned to him. There was a fire burning where the boys were, and two tents of considerable size had been set up not far away.

This was the temporary home of the boys of the Beaver Patrol who were spending the last weeks of the warm season in the Everglades. The boys were Sandy Green, blue-eyed and merry; Will Smith, brown-eyed and rather inclined to meet trouble more than half way; George Benton, blond and imaginative, and Tommy Gregory, red-headed, freckled and brimming over with vitality.

The boys were not far from sixteen years of age, and were all enthusiastic Boy Scouts. Besides the Beaver badges which they wore on their coats, their sleeves showed medals which had been earned in examinations more than a year before. These medals were the Ambulance, the Stalker, the Pioneer and the Seaman. They showed proficiency in giving first aid to the injured, proficiency in hunting game in the forest,

proficiency in the stunts of pioneer life, and proficiency in handling boats. Will Smith was scoutmaster of the Beavers.

As Tommy passed over the debris of fallen leaves that rattled and crunched under foot one of the boys called to him from the camp:

"Where's your fish, Tommy?" he asked.

"Fish?" repeated Tommy in disgust. "I can't find any fishpole! I don't know why we didn't bring poles with us!"

"We did," Will shouted back. "You'll find two standing in one of the lockers of the motor boat."

"Why didn't you say so," grumbled Tommy. "Here I've been hunting for an hour, trying to get something to tie a line to, and the fish are just begging to be caught! You wait a minute and see what kind of a breakfast I'll get! I'm going to bring in a straw bass two feet long!"

"Do you mean one of those large-mouthed square-tailed black bass?" asked George. "If you do, you'll have to go up north to get one!"

"That's all you know about straw bass!" laughed Tommy. "You'll find them everywhere, from the Red River of the North to the Everglades. If you don't believe it, I'll go right now and get one!"

The boy started away but George called him back.

"Where's your bait?" he asked. "You haven't got any bait, have you?"

"I'm going to dig some worms out here!" answered Tommy.

"What kind of worms?" demanded George.

"Angleworms!" answered Tommy, scornfully.

"Angleworms," advised George with a wise look, "never come to Florida! The angleworm lives in loam, while the Florida soil is made up of sharp sand and decayed vegetable matter. Any angleworm that tried to bore through the soil here would look like he had been run over a grindstone in about one hour! No angleworms for bait here, son!"

"Look here," Tommy exclaimed indignantly, "why don't you come out here and do this fishing yourself?"

"I'm keeping up the fire!" laughed George.

Will arose and slowly approached the edge of the thicket where the boy stood, looking very much disgusted with the situation.

"Look here, kid," he said, "I'll show you how to get bait. Read about it in a newspaper not long ago. You see," he said, "these bass spawn in the high waters. After a time the little sandy-bottomed branches that lead off from the river are filled with bass from a half an inch to three inches in length. When more high water comes the minnows are swept farther up, and during the dry season they are stranded in tiny pools so thick they can be scooped out with the hand."

"Lead me to them!" cried Tommy brightly.

"All right," Will replied, "only you want to get a landing net or something of that kind, for it isn't always safe to put your fingers into the pools. You're just as likely to bring up a mess

of lizards as anything else! The lizards won't hurt, but they're not agreeable companions."

George brought out a landing net and Will and Tommy turned in the direction of the Beaver, which lay on the side of the island opposite to that where Sandy sat in his canoe. The prow of the boat was drawn up on a beach grown over with water plants. It should have lain in the water perfectly still and stable, but when the boys approached they saw little ripples running out from the stern.

"Now, what's doing on board that boat?" demanded Tommy, as he stepped out of the thicket. "Maybe there's a fish on board!"

"Probably something moving it from the outside," Will suggested.

"Outside nothing!" Tommy exclaimed. "The water at the stern is clear as crystal, and there isn't even a crab near the rudder."

"A sure way to find out all about it," Will laughed, "is to go aboard and investigate. Have you got your gun with you?"

"Of course!" answered the boy. "I never leave the boat without an automatic and an electric searchlight!"

"I left mine at the camp," Will explained, "so I'll go into the cabin and you stand ready to shoot if there's anything worth shooting at shows up."

"Me for the cabin!" cried Tommy.

Before Will could offer any objections the boy sprang on the prow of the boat and dashed back to the little trunk cabin, which extended over about two-thirds of the deck. Will saw

him open the door which had not been fastened and then back out again.

"Look here, Will!" he cried, swinging his automatic into the air and catching it deftly as it came down. "Come on board and see what I've found. You needn't be afraid! It won't bite!"

Wondering what the lad had come upon in the cabin, Will covered the short space of deck in an instant and looked inside. The center of the cabin was occupied by a table where the boys ate their meals when on board. The previous evening several loaves of bread, tins of beans, and a great stack of boiled potatoes ready for frying, had been left on this table. What Will saw was a boy of about fourteen busily wielding a knife and fork, without even looking up at his visitors.

The lad was every bit as red-headed and freckled-faced as Tommy. He was dressed in the uniform of an A. D. T. messenger, and a large, official-looking letter lay on the table at his elbow.

"What do you think of him?" asked Tommy, looking over Will's shoulder.

"I think he's hungry!" answered Will.

The messenger boy dropped his knife and fork, turned a whimsical face toward the doorway, and took up the letter.

"Here's your message!" he said. "I brought it all the way from Chicago. He took a book from his pocket—such a book as messenger boys carry the world over—and laid it down

on the table. Then he took a pencil from his pocket and held it out to Will.

"Sign here," he said, pointing out a line with a dirty finger.

One would have thought from the boy's manner that the message being delivered had been only five minutes on the way, and that the boy making the delivery had passed up an elevator in a Dearborn street building, instead of traveling hundreds of miles by land and water.

"Read it quick!" he said, as Will signed.

"It's important!"