

CHAPTER II

MISSION FROM CHICAGO

Will sat down in a chair at the end of the table and proceeded to open the envelope. While he did so Tommy regarded the messenger quizzically for a moment and then asked:

"You're Mickey Murphy?"

The messenger boy cut a great slice of bread, thickly buttered it, and grinned. Tommy moved up closer.

"You worked in the same office I did for a time," he said.

"Sure I did," replied Mickey.

"How'd you get down here?" was the next question.

Mickey pointed at the legal-looking document, which Will was now scanning closely, and resumed his attack on the bread.

"That will tell you," he said.

"Did you come all alone?" asked Tommy, then.

"Sure!" was the reply. "Do you think they would be apt to send a company of state troops to show me the way?"

"When you get your mouth empty," Tommy declared impatiently, "perhaps you'll tell us how you found Lost Channel."

The boy was about to reply when Will rose excitedly to his feet and began walking up and down the little cabin.

"Here's another mission for us!" he declared.

"Chuck it in the river!" cried Tommy.

"Are you going to let me stay here?" demanded Mickey.

"Don't get gay now!" advised Tommy.

"Just you wait until we decide what we're going to do with this mission business!"

"The letter," Will went on in a moment, "is from the president of the Lake Trust Company. He wants us to look out for a boy who disappeared from Chicago about ten years ago and is believed to have been brought into the Everglades. He thinks he's here yet."

"All right!" cut in Tommy. "If we find any boy who was brought here from Chicago ten years ago, we'll send his address to the President of the Lake Trust Company. What's in it?"

"Hear what President Herrick says," advised Will, "before you do any more miscellaneous talking. He begins 'My dear Will.'"

"Gee!" exclaimed Tommy. "How'd he know your name?"

"Aw, give the kid a chance to read his letter!" Mickey cut in.

"This is what he says," Will went on, reading from the letter:

"I am writing this letter by the advice of the attorney in whose office you were employed not long ago. He advises me that you are doubtless in a position to render great service

in an important case I have in hand. Briefly, the situation is as follows:

"Ten years ago John and Mary Hoover, parents of Albert Hoover, at that time six years of age, died very suddenly in this city. Their holdings at that time were not considered especially valuable, and no attempt to pass the estate through the probate court was made. This Albert Hoover was the only issue of the marriage, and naturally their entire estate belongs to him."

"Cripes!" exclaimed Tommy. "If he's rich I hope we find him!"

"The estate consisted mostly of unimproved lots out on Milwaukee avenue," Will read on. "During the past ten years this property has appreciated in value immensely, and there is now a sharp demand for it for business purposes. Not long ago a claimant appeared. Without doubt he is the nephew of John Hoover and the cousin of the boy who disappeared from Chicago shortly after the death of his parents."

"Can't I go on eating while you're reading that letter?" demanded Mickey. "I heard the whole story in the Chicago office."

"Go to it!" laughed Tommy.

"I have clients ready to pay a large sum for the property," the letter went on, "but no satisfactory transfer can be made until the death of Albert Hoover is established. If he is alive then, of course, the deal can be made by the appointment of a guardian, as he would at this time be only about sixteen years of age."

"I'd like that job myself," Mickey interrupted, with a wink at Tommy.

"'As I am acting for possible purchasers,' " the letter went on, " 'it is immaterial to me whether the deeds are executed by Henry Hoover, the nephew, who is of age, or Albert Hoover, the direct heir, a minor. I seek only to clear the title so that the purchase may be completed.' "

"How does he think we're going to find a lost heir in the Everglades?" demanded Tommy.

"I guess he's got bats in his belfry!"

"Just you wait a minute!" advised Mickie Murphy.

" 'Not long ago,' " continued the manuscript, " 'one of the Jacksonville daily newspapers printed the portraits of people sought by officers of the law as fugitives from justice. It is said that they are wanted for burning false beacons on the Florida coast, and for the murder of one Theron Tracy, whose yacht was wrecked because of a misleading signal.' "

"Chuck it in the river, I say!" Tommy exclaimed at this point. "We came down here to fish and hunt and sleep in the sun, didn't we? Well, then, what's the use of our mixing up in any wrecker's beacon plot? First thing we know, we'll be in just about the same fix we were on Lake Superior!"

"Forget it, kid!" grinned Mickey. "Just you wait a minute!"

"The portraits represent two roughly-dressed, heavily-bearded men, almost giants in size, and one boy—a lad certainly not more

than fifteen years of age. The portraits are all remarkably good, especially that of the boy. They were brought to my office by an old friend of the parents who brought with them a photograph of Albert Hoover, taken at the age of six years. There is no doubt in my mind that the boy in the newspaper picture and the boy who sat for the photograph are one and the same.' "

"That fellow must be quite a sleuth!" Tommie broke in.

"The newspaper article which carried the portraits,' " the letter continued, "stated that the two fugitives from justice, James and Robert Revell, were known to have taken refuge in the Everglades.' "

"Jerusalem!" exclaimed Tommy. "I'm going to sleep with my gun in my hand all the time I'm here!"

"You just hold on a minute," Mickey Murphy suggested.

"In another part of the newspaper,' " Will read on, "was a telegram from a correspondent in a little town near Lake Okeechobee, stating that the two Revells had been seen in that vicinity, and that they had departed in the night time in a stolen boat. The correspondent added that while there they had made many inquiries regarding Lost Channel and that section of the Florida swamp known as the Everglades. I consider it extremely fortunate that you are on the spot at this time, especially as you are described to me as a courageous and resourceful young man. Your friend explained

to me fully the situation on Lake Superior at the time of your visit to the Pictured Rocks.' ”

Will returned the letter to the envelope and tossed it over into a locker. Tom regarded him quizzically for a moment and then asked:

“What’s in it?”

“You’re a mercenary little rascal!” Will answered.

“Well, I wonder if he thinks we’re going to get mixed up with wreckers and beachcombers in the interests of our health?” demanded the boy.

“The reward for the discovery of Albert Hoover is ten thousand dollars,” replied Will, “and the bringing forward of proof of his death will net five thousand dollars. Is it worth while?”

“No!” said Tommy.

“Yes!” said Mickey.

“You’ve got your nerve!” cried Tommy turning to Mickey. “When did you get a vote in this caucus? Little boys should keep still until they are spoken to!”

“I’m going to stay and help find him!” insisted Mickey.

“Yes, you are!” grinned Tommy. “We don’t even know how you got here yet. This may be a fake, for all we know.”

Mickey threw back the lapel of his blue coat exhibiting the well-known badge of the Beaver Patrol. On the inside of his coat were pinned medals showing proficiency as a Stalker, a Pioneer and a Seaman.

“He’s my Scoutmaster,” the boy said, point-

ing to Will. "I guess he can tell you I'm no fraud!"

Will regarded the boy curiously for a moment.

"I begin to recognize you now," he said. "You're one of the lads who were advanced to First-Class Scout just before we left for Lake Superior. Tommy vouched for you at that time, I remember."

"Sure, I did!" cried Tommy. "He's an all right kid, but I'd like him better if he'd tell us how he ever managed to find us."

"Aw, that was easy enough!" replied the messenger boy. "When the president of the Lake Trust Company came to the office to inquire about you, the manager pointed me out as a lad who would be able to find you if anyone would. He said I knew you well; knew just what kind of a monkey you were, and buffaloes the Trust man until he hired me to come. I told him I wouldn't come back, though, until you boys returned," the boy added with a wink. "And he said I needn't."

"But how did you find us?" insisted Will.

"I left the Flagler railroad at Webster Lake," the boy replied, "and hired a greasy old Seminole Indian to bring me out in a canoe. It's only about forty miles as the little birds fly, but he made three days journey of it on account of the channels we were obliged to follow running in every direction. This is sure some country down here!"

"Where is this Seminole Indian now?" asked Will

"Say," laughed Mickey, "if you'd seen him push me on board this old scow this morning and duck away, you'd 'a' thought the island was too hot to handle. The Indians are afraid of this island!"

"Ghosts?" asked Tommy with a wink.

"Robbers!" replied the boy.

George now came pushing through the thicket which bordered the island and leaped aboard. The next moment Sandy came paddling up in his canoe. After the situation had been explained to the two newcomers, Will asked:

"What do you think, boys, shall we mix up in this?"

"Sure!" cried George.

"You bet!" answered Sandy.

"Not for mine!" Tommy insisted.

"Tommy's afraid!" jeered Sandy.

"I'm afraid, too," announced Mickey, "but I'm going to stick!"

"What's the harm of looking for the lost boy?" asked Will, turning to Tommy. "We may be the means of bringing him a fortune."

"Yes, and we may be the means of getting into a mixup with these wreckers and beach-combers!" replied Tommy. "I guess if you get those people good and hot, you'll wish yourself back in your little old steam-heated room on Washington boulevard!"

"The eyes have it!" Will exclaimed with a laugh. "Motion carried."

"All right!" declared Tommy. "I'm game! I'll stick, but after you fellows get your heads

cut off and your bodies buried in Lost Channel you needn't go and blame me for it."

"And now," Sandy said, "as the matter is decided, and we're in for a bout with the wreckers if they come our way, perhaps I'd better tell you what I came here to say."

The boys were all attention in a moment. Even Mickey stopped with a slice of bread only half buttered.

"After Tommy left me to hunt up a fishpole," Sandy went on, "I saw one of these canvas canoes hiding behind a shelter of bushes on the north shore of the channel. After waiting a time for Tommy to come back, I paddled over that way. The fellow in the canoe saw me coming and ducked! But, look here," he went on, "of all the evil-faced, wicked-looking brutes I ever put my lamps on, that one takes the cake!"

"Which way did he go?" asked Will.

"He paddled up a creek that enters the channel back to the east. I sat watching him for a minute, thinking that he might turn back and say something, but he didn't!"

"That may be one of the Revell brothers!" George suggested, with a wink at Tommy.

"In that case, we may have company tonight!"

"All right!" Tommy answered. "I can stand it if you can. I thought all along that Sandy was going to say he saw the lost heir in the canoe."

"I believe I did!" replied Sandy. "Listen!"