

## CHAPTER IV

### A YOUNG CRUSOE

AFTER the departure of Sandy and Mickey the three boys busied themselves with the breakfast dishes for a time, and then Tommy disappeared in the direction of the Beaver.

"Bring back another fish, kid!" Will called, as the boy passed from sight. "And bring a bass this time."

"All right!" Tommy answered. "I'll bring a fish big enough to last us a month. There's plenty of them in here!"

Tommy expected to find Sandy and Mickey when he reached the boat, and was not a little surprised at their absence.

"That was just a scheme of theirs," he declared impatiently, "to get away from me! They've gone off to look up the canoeist and the boy Sandy saw this morning!"

Tommy searched the thickets in the vicinity of the motor-boat in quest of another canoe, but none was in sight, although they had brought three to the island, two of them being handsome Oldtown crafts, brought in from the north on the flat car which had carried the motor-boat to Punta Corda, from which point they had traveled up the Caloosahatchee river and through the canal to Lake Okeechobee, thence into a maze of channels to the south.

He was about to call out to his chums and ask for information regarding the location of the canoes when he saw one of them drawn up on the shore of a cove which was almost entirely concealed by luxuriant growths. Then he remembered that Will and George had been delegated to conceal the canoes, and that they had taken them away in that direction.

After traveling a considerable distance along the shore of this island he drew his canoe up and looked about. There were no signs of the camp. In fact, the center of the island upon which he stood was not at all like the center of the island where the camp had been pitched.

"I guess," he mused, after looking over the place thoroughly, "I'll have to paddle back and take another direction."

He returned to the point where he had left the canoe to find it gone!

He had heard no footstep, no rustling of the undergrowth, no motion of the water, and yet the canoe had disappeared as utterly as if it had been lifted into the air!

The lad ran hastily up and down the bank forcing his way to the water's edge and peering through thickets at regular intervals, but no trace of the missing boat could be discovered.

"And now," he declared dejectedly, "I've gone and lost a canoe that cost a barrel of money in Chicago. And that ain't the worst of it!" he went on. "I've gone and lost myself!"

He continued the search for a long time but nothing came of it.

He could see only a short distance up or down

the channel which passed the island for the reason that there were many abrupt bends, all of which were heavily massed with trees and undergrowth.

So far as he knew, the stolen canoe might be only a few yards distant from him, and yet be as impossible of recovery as if it had been taken by some sly thief to the Atlantic coast.

At last, wearied out with his exertions, the boy sat down at a point where the thicket opened a trifle, revealing the sunny waters of the channel, and began considering the possibility of getting back to camp. The water was not deep, yet he disliked the idea of swimming back. He believed that the alligators would not be apt to molest him, but he knew, too, that the waters of the Everglades swarm with poisonous snakes.

While he studied over the matter, his mind half made up to take to the water, a voice came from the thicket at his right.

Tommy sprang to his feet, dodged behind the bole of a pine, and laid his hand on his automatic. For a minute there was complete silence, save for the noises made by the flying and creeping things which inhabited the island. Then the voice called again:

"Hello, hello!" it said.

"Hello, yourself!" replied Tommy.

There was a rustling in the thicket, and a boy not far from Tommy's own age made his appearance. His clothes were in tatters, and his face and hands were tanned with sun and wind until they looked like the face and hands of a

mulatto. Indeed, Tommy might have taken him for a negro only for the blue eyes and light hair.

Seeing that the newcomer was without weapons of any kind, Tommy stepped out from behind his tree and looked him over. To his surprise the lad extended his right hand in the full salute of the Boy Scouts of America. Then Tommy saw a Black Bear Patrol badge pinned to the lapel of a ragged coat.

"Where'd you come from, Black Bear?" he asked.

"Chicago!" was the reply.

"I know some of the Chicago Black Bears," Tommy suggested.

"And I know some of the Chicago Beavers," returned the other, noting the badge on the boy's coat.

"Where do you live?" asked Tommy, in a moment.

"Anywhere!" was the reply.

"You look it!" laughed Tommy. "Say," he went on with a grin, "I can take you up to a Clark street museum and get you a date as the original wild man from Borneo. How did you get in here, anyway?"

"I paddled in," was the other's reply.

"All alone?" asked Tommy.

"No," was the answer. "Anse Dupree came in with me, but he got lost and I haven't seen him since!"

"How long have you been here alone?"

"About two weeks!"

"How do you like it?"

"Oh, it's not so worse!"

Tommy leaned back against the tree and laughed.

"If you could just see yourself right now," he said in a moment, "you'd think it was 'so worse.'"

"You don't see me wasting away with hunger, or anything of that kind, do you?" asked the boy. "I'm doing pretty well here."

"Jerusalem!" exclaimed Tommy. "Do you mean to say you have your eats regular on this desolate island?"

"Come along, I'll show you!" replied the other.

"Wait a minute," Tommy exclaimed as the boy moved away, "what have you done with my canoe?"

"Haven't seen your old canoe!" was the reply.

"Then there's some one else been here!" Tommy declared.

"I've been wanting a canoe badly enough," the other went on, "but I haven't had any chance to geeze one."

"Then who did take it?" demanded Tommy.

"Search me!" replied the other.

"What's your name?" asked Tommy.

"Chester Mapes, known to my friends in Chicago as just 'Chet.'"

"Where do you live in Chicago?" asked Tommy.

"Drexel boulevard."

"Gee!" Tommy exclaimed. "Your people must be well fixed!"

"Oh, they've got a few!" was the laughing reply.

"Well," Tommy said with a puzzled air, "I don't understand why you've been hanging about this island all alone for two weeks."

"You see," Chet replied with a laugh, "Anse and I agreed to meet here if either got lost. I wouldn't go away from this island longer than an hour at a time if you'd give me the Masonic temple. I'm sure he'll be here before long now."

"You're the original little Robinson Crusoe!" laughed Tommy. "But come on," the boy continued, "what were you going to show me a minute ago?"

"Me palatial residence!" laughed the other. "Come on," he added, leading the way to the interior of the island."

The boy had constructed quite a comfortable shelter of brush and leaves, and a fire which showed traces of recent cookery burned brightly not far from the entrance.

"What do you cook?" asked Tommy.

"Fish, mostly," was the reply, "though I snare a duck now and then."

Tommy glanced about the shelter with a wistful look on his face.

"I'm hungry myself right now!" he said.

"All right!" Chet answered. "I've got a fish that's never been cooked, and a sack of flour that's never been opened, so, if you'll just loiter in the palatial reception room a short time, I'll have a dinner that you couldn't buy

at the Bismark in little old Chicago for less than a dollar and a half."

"Where'd you get the flour and things to make bread?" asked Tommy in amazement. "You're like you were keeping house here."

"Brought 'em here!" was the reply. "We landed a whole boat load of truck on this island, and then Anse got lost, and some one stole the boat, and I've been here alone ever since."

"I wonder if it's the same fellow that stole my canoe?" asked Tommy.

"There's some one stealing regularly," Chet went on. "I've missed flour, and baking powder, and canned beans, and a whole lot of things."

"Why don't you watch 'em?" demanded Tommy.

"I have watched, night after night," was the reply, "and never caught any one. They don't steal on the nights I watch."

"Have you never seen any one hanging about the island?" asked the boy.

"Never!" was the answer. "You're the first person I've spoken with for almost two weeks!"

"It's a wonder you wouldn't get out and try to find your chum," Tommy said.

"Oh, he isn't wandering about here," Chet went on. "He started back to Webster lake, and either got lost on the way or has been unaccountably delayed. He'll be here before long now."

"Perhaps some one stole his boat when he stopped on the way," Tommy suggested. There

seems to be a pretty good demand for boats down here," he went on. "You can use my canoe if you can find it."

During this conversation, Tommy had been busily engaged in cleaning an attractive looking bass and Chet had devoted his attention to the preparation of baking powder biscuit.

Finally the fish was ready for the pan except rinsing, and the boy ran down to the margin of the channel to complete the preparation. A moment later he rushed back to the fire, minus the fish.

"Say" he said, addressing Chet, excitedly, "what kind of a game is this? What kind of a sucker do you think I am?"

"What's the trouble now?" asked the other boy.

"I guess you know what the trouble is, all right!" declared Tommy, angrily. "You're one of the beachcombers, that's who you are!"

"If you'll just quiet down a little," Chet replied, a flush of anger creeping into his brown cheeks, "I may be able to understand what you're getting at. Where is your fish?"

"Why," replied Tommy, "I set it down on the bank while I went up to a little bight to see if I could catch a glimpse of my canoe, and when I returned it was gone. Did you come down and get it?"

"Well," Chet answered with a puzzled smile, "that means that we'll have to have canned beans for dinner."

"I guess the old island is haunted!" declared Tommy.