

THE OUTDOOR GIRLS IN FLORIDA

BY LAURA LEE HOPE

CHAPTER VI: AN APPEAL FOR HELP

For one of the very few times in her life when confronted by an emergency the “Little Captain” did not know quite what to do. Grace clung to Betty, murmuring over and over again:

“What shall I say? What shall I do?”

Amy and Mollie stared uncomprehendingly at one another. Grace still held the telegram that had brought more bad news.

Then Betty got her senses in working order.

“In the first place,” she said, “you mustn’t let your mother know about this, Grace. You must keep it from her. In the second place your father must be told at once. Now you go in and act as if nothing had happened. I’ll go see your father.”

“But I can’t act as if nothing had happened,” protested Grace, with a wailing tone in her voice. “I’d be sure to act so strangely that mamma would suspect at once, and begin to question me.”

“Then Mollie or Amy must go in with you, and help to keep up appearances. Amy, you go in and talk—play—sing—dance—do anything to keep Grace from feeling bad, and giving away the secret. As soon as Mr. Ford comes he can decide whether or not to tell his wife. Mollie, you and I will go down to his office. This is the night he gets home late; isn’t it, Grace?”

“Yes. Oh, how I wish he were here now! Poor Will!”

“Well, we’ll soon have him home,” declared Betty. “Now you two do as I tell you. Talk about Florida—anything but what has happened. Mr. Ford will know what to do when he comes. Now, Mollie, let’s hurry. Gracious! I believe it’s going to snow. Well, we won’t have any of that in Florida, that’s a blessing for you, Grace,” and Betty smiled bravely.

“We may never go now—if Will isn’t found.”

“Oh, he’ll be all right,” declared Betty, with more confidence than she felt. “Come along, Mollie.”

The two set off through the gathering storm, while Grace and Amy turned into the former's house. They were under a strain, and afterward they hardly remembered what they did. But Grace did not betray the secret, at any rate. The two girls talked of many things, and when Mrs. Ford referred to the home-coming of her son Amy changed the subject as soon as she could.

Then, fortunately, Mrs. Ford went upstairs to lie down until dinner was ready, and Grace, with a sigh of relief, threw herself on a couch.

"There!" she sighed. "We can act naturally now. Poor little mother—I wonder how she will take it?"

"Oh, she is brave," said Amy. "Besides, nothing very dreadful can have happened. Will may be all right. Even if he has gone off with a labor contractor, who has a bad reputation, your brother is able to look after himself. He can appeal to the police, if necessary."

"Perhaps. Anyhow, you can look on the bright side, Amy. I wish papa would hurry."

"Oh, he will, as soon as Betty tells him."

Meanwhile Betty and Mollie were hurrying on through the storm to Mr. Ford's office. They found him working over a complicated law case, and he seemed startled when he saw the two girls.

"Where is Grace—what has happened?" he asked, quickly.

"This telegram—it came for you to the house—Grace opened it," explained Mollie, briefly.

Mr. Ford seemed to comprehend it at a glance.

"I was afraid of this!" he exclaimed. "Some of those rascally labor contractors will do anything to get help. I will have to go down there, I think. Does Mrs. Ford know?"

"No, I told Grace to keep it from her until you came home."

"That was right. I must make light of this. Then I'll leave for Jacksonville at once. Thank you very much, Betty."

He closed his desk and went out with the girls, calling a carriage for them and himself, as the snow was now falling heavily.

In some way Mr. Ford managed to impart some of the details of the new emergency to his wife without unduly arousing her. He also spoke of the necessity of going to Florida.

"Oh, do you really have to go?" his wife asked, in alarm.

"I think it will be better. Will may do something rash, thinking he is putting through a fine business deal. I don't want him to get into—legal difficulties. It would



not look well for my professional reputation,” and Mr. Ford forced a laugh to reassure his wife.

Arrangements for going to Jacksonville were soon made, as he was to leave on the midnight train. In the meanwhile he communicated with the telegraph authorities in the South, telling them of his plans, and asking for any additional information.

All that he could learn was that Will had gone to the address given in his first letter—a private boarding house. He had been there a few days, making friends with the landlady, and finally had gone off with a man who bore a shady reputation in the city. Will had said he was going farther into the interior, and the woman thought she heard something about a lumber camp, or a place where turpentine and other pine-tar products, were obtained.

“Well, do the best you can, Grace, until I come back,” said Mr. Ford. “And look after your mother. Perhaps this will be all right after all.”

There were three weary days of waiting, relieved only by brief messages from Mr. Ford, saying that he was doing all he could to find Will. Mrs. Ford was not told the whole story, save that her son had gone into the interior.

“Oh, I’m sure something must have happened!” exclaimed Grace, when on the fourth day there came a message saying Mr. Ford was on his way back. “He hasn’t Will with him, or he would have said so. Oh, isn’t it perfectly terrible!”

“Now, don’t worry,” advised Betty. “I know that is easy to say, Grace, and hard to do. But try. Even if your father hasn’t found Will, perhaps he has some trace of him. He would hardly come back without good reason.”

“I suppose not. Oh, aren’t boys—terrible!”

“But Will didn’t mean to cause all this trouble,” spoke Mollie.

“I know. But he has, just the same.”

Grace was too miserable even to think of chocolates.

Mr. Ford looked pale and tired when he came home, and his eyes showed loss of sleep.

“Well,” he said to Grace, who was surrounded by her three chums, “I didn’t find Will. He seems to have made a mess of it.”

“How?” asked his sister.

“Well, by getting in with this developing concern. It seems that he signed some sort of contract, agreeing to work for them. He supposed it was clerical or secretary’s work, but it turns out that he was deceived. What he signed was a contract to work in one of the many camps in the wilds of the interior. He may be getting out cypress, or turpentine.”



“Couldn’t you locate him, Daddy?” asked Grace.

“No, for the firm he signed with operates many camps. I could get very little satisfaction from them. I may have to appeal to the authorities.”

“But Will is not of age—they can’t hold him even if he did sign a contract to work, especially when they deceived him,” declared Grace.

“I know it, my dear,” replied her father. “But they have him in their clutches, and possession, as you know, is nine points of the law, and part of the tenth. Where Will is I don’t know. Just as the message said, he went off with that smooth talker, and he seems to have disappeared.”

“How—how can you find him?” asked Grace.

“I’m going to have your Uncle Isaac trace him. He knows the South better than I, and can work to better advantage. That is why I came back. Uncle Isaac is in New York City now. I am going to telegraph him to come on here and I’ll give him the particulars. Then he can hunt for Will. Poor boy! I guess he wishes now that he’d stayed in the mill.”

The news was broken to Mrs. Ford as gently as could be, but it nearly prostrated her. Then Uncle Isaac came, and to his credit be it said that he was kinder than his wont. He seemed really sympathetic and did not once say, “I told you so!”

He readily agreed to search for his nephew, and left for the South as soon as he could finish his business.

“I guess our Florida trip is all off,” said Grace with a sigh, one evening.

“Not at all,” said her father. “I want you girls to go. It may be that you might hear some word of Will.”

“Then we will go!” his sister cried. “Oh! I do hope we can find him.”

The preparations for the Florida trip went on. Meanwhile nothing was heard from the missing youth, and Uncle Isaac had no success.

Then, most unexpectedly, there came word from the boy himself—indirect word—but news just the same.

It was in the shape of a letter from a Southern planter, who said one of his hands had picked up the enclosed note in a cotton field near a railroad track. It had probably been tossed from a train window, and had laid some time in the field, being rain-soaked. It bore Mr. Ford’s address, and so the planter forwarded it. The note was as follows:

“DEAR DAD: I certainly am in trouble. That development business was a fake, and I have literally been kidnapped, with a lot of other young fellows—some colored. They’re taking us away to a turpentine swamp to work. I’ve tried to escape, but it’s



no use. I appealed for help to the crowd, as did some of the others, but the contractors declared we were a lot of criminals farmed out by the State. And, as a lot of their workers really are convicts, I had no show. I don't know what to do—help me if you can. I don't know where they're taking us, but if I get a chance I'll send word. I'm scribbling this under my hat in the train, and I'm going to toss it out the window. I hope you get it.

“WILL.”

