

THE OUTDOOR GIRLS IN FLORIDA

BY LAURA LEE HOPE



CHAPTER VIII: LAUNCHING THE BOAT

“Can you smell the orange blossoms?”

“Yes. Aren’t they delicious!”

“It reminds me of a wedding—hark, can you hear the strains of Mendelssohn?”

“Those are frogs, Betty,” laughed Mollie.

The girls and Mr. and Mrs. Stonington were driving in a big canopy-topped carriage along a Florida road, toward the orange grove on the outskirts of the town of Bentonville. Their journey was over and at last they were in Florida.

“Oh, see the magnolias!” cried Grace, as they passed a tree in full bloom, the fragrance being almost overpowering. “They are just like those the boys sold us when the train stopped.”

“Only they smell much sweeter,” said Betty.

“Yes, almost too sweet,” added Mollie.

Their trip had been practically without incident, and certainly without accident. There had been one or two delays, caused by various small happenings, but finally they had steamed into the junction station, where they took a way train for Bentonville.

This last was a short trip, the one in the compartment car, without change, having been rather monotonous. And yet not dull, for the girls found much to talk about, to speculate upon and to wonder at.

The snow, the cold and biting winds had gradually been left behind, and Nature, coy and uncertain at first, had, with the advance into the South, grown bolder. They had come from the land of bleakness and barrenness—from the place of leafless trees—into the region of Summer, almost in a day and night. They had exchanged snows for flowers.

Mrs. Stonington had stood the trip well, though a trifle weary and worn as the end of the journey came in sight. But the warm and balmy air of the South seemed to revive her, and her cheeks, that had been pale, took on a tinge of color.

“Oh, I am so glad,” murmured Amy, and the others were glad with her.



They had delayed at the Bentonville station long enough to make sure that Betty's boat had arrived, and to send home telegrams telling of their safe journey.

They had been met by a man from the orange grove, a kindly Southern worker, whose very nature seemed a protest against haste and worry.

"Well," he greeted them slowly, "I see you all has arrived. Welcome, folks! Now when you're ready we'll move along; but don't be in no rush. It's too pow'ful warm to rush."

Indeed it was warm, and the girls, who had changed to some of their summer garments, felt the truth of this.

"Oh, for a lawn waist and a white skirt, low canvas shoes and a palm leaf fan!" sighed Mollie, as they drove beneath great trees that tempered the heat of the sun.

"Anything else?" asked Betty with a laugh.

"Lemonade," suggested Amy. "Or, no, since we are on an orange plantation I suppose orangeade would be more appropriate, girls."

"Anything as long as it's cool," sighed Grace. "I declare, all my chocolates have run together," and she looked with dismay into a box of the confection she had been carrying.

"No wonder—it's summer, and we left winter behind us," said Betty. "You'll have to give up chocolates down here, Grace, my dear."

"Or else keep them on ice," ventured Amy.

A turn of the road brought them in full view of the orange grove in which Mr. Stonington was interested, and at the sight a murmur of pleased surprise broke from the girls.

"And to think of going out there and picking oranges as one would apples!" exclaimed Amy. "Doesn't it seem odd to see oranges that aren't in a crate, or a fruit store?"

"Some of those will be in crates 'fore night," said the driver. "We're picking every day now. It's a good season, and we're making the most of it," he added to Mr. Stonington.

"Glad to hear it. You'll have to ship them as fast as you can with four orange-hungry girls on hand," and he laughed at Amy and her chums.

"Oh, Uncle Stonington!" Amy cried. "As if we could eat all the oranges here!" and she looked over the rows and rows of fruit-laden trees.

"You ain't no idea how many oranges you can eat, when yo'all get them right off a tree," said the driver. "They taste different from the ones you Northerners have, I tell you!"



One of the foremen, whom Mr. Stonington had met before, came from the grove to welcome them, and to show them the way to the bungalow they were to occupy during their stay in the South.

"We hope you will like it here," said the overseer, a Mr. Hammond.

"I don't see how we could help it," said Mrs. Stonington. "I am in love with the place already, and I feel so much better even with this little taste of Summer."

"That's good!" exclaimed her husband, with shining eyes.

As the carriage stopped in front of a cool-looking bungalow, a "comfortable-looking" colored "mammy" came to the door smiling expansively.

"Bress all yo' hea'ts!" she exclaimed. "Climb right down, and come in yeah! I's got de fried chicken an' corn pone all ready fo' yo'all. An' dere's soft crabs fo' dem as wants 'em, an' chicken-gumbo soup, an'—"

"Hold on, Aunt Hannah!" exclaimed Mr. Hammond with a laugh. "Have a little mercy on them. Maybe they are not hungry for all your good things."

"Oh, aren't we, though!" cried Mollie. "Just try me. I've always wanted chicken fried in the Southern style."

"You'll get it here," said Mr. Stonington.

Let us pass over that first meal—something that the girls did not do by any means—but the mere details of our friends arriving, getting settled, and then of resting to enjoy life as they had never enjoyed it before, can have little of interest to the reader. So, as I said, let us pass over a few days.

Each one, it is true, brought something new and of peculiar interest to the girls, but it was only because they had never before been in Florida. To the residents it was all an old story—even the picking of oranges.

The grove was near a beautiful stream, not such a river as was the Argono of Deepdale, but broader, more shallow and sluggish.

"I wonder if there are alligators in it?" asked Betty, of one of the pickers.

"Not around here," he answered. "You have to go into the bayous, or swamps, for them critters. Don't yo'all worry 'bout the 'gators."

"We won't when we get in the Gem," said Betty. "I wonder when they will bring her up and launch her?"

"Let's go to the depot and find out," suggested Amy. "We can have a carriage and team with a driver any time we want it, Uncle Stonington said."

At the freight office the boat was promised to them for the following day, but it was two before this promise was kept.



“You mustn’t fret,” said Mr. Stonington, when Betty grew rather impatient. “Remember you are down South. Few persons hurry here.”

But finally the Gem arrived, and after some hard work she was launched. Proudly she rode the river, as proudly as at Deepdale, and Betty, with a little cry of joy, took her place at the wheel.

Batteries and magneto were in place, some gasoline was provided, and a little later the motor boat was ready for her first trip in Southern waters.

“All aboard!” cried Betty, as the engine was started.

Slowly, but with gathering speed, the trim craft shot out into the middle of the Mayfair.

“Oh, this is just perfect!” breathed Mollie. There was a little cloud on the face of Grace. They all knew what it was, and sympathized with her. No news had come about Will.

They puffed along, to the wonder and admiration of many of the colored pickers, who stopped to look—any excuse was good enough for stopping—especially the sight of a motor boat. Suddenly Grace, who was trailing her hand over the stern, gave a startled cry, and sprang up.

“Oh! oh!” she screamed. “An alligator. I nearly touched the horrid thing! Go ashore, Betty!”

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