

# THE OUTDOOR GIRLS IN FLORIDA

BY LAURA LEE HOPE

## CHAPTER IX: ON A SANDBAR

“Alligators!” screamed Amy. “Don’t you dare say that, Grace!”

“But it’s so—I saw one—I nearly put my hand on his big black head. Oh, isn’t it horrid!”

Grace and Amy were clinging to each other now in the middle of the boat. Betty had turned about at their exclamations, and Mollie was gazing curiously into the swirling water.

“I don’t see any alligator,” she announced, unbelievably. “Are you sure you saw one, Grace?”

“Of course I am. Oh, Betty! There’s one now, just ahead of you. You’re going to run into him!”

Betty turned her attention to guiding the boat only just in time. Certainly something long and knobby and black was almost at the bow. She veered to one side, and then exclaimed:

“Alligator! That was nothing but a log, Grace Ford! How silly of you!”

“Silly? Nothing of the sort. I tell you I did see an alligator.”

“It was a log—but it does look like one of the big creatures, though,” said Amy. “Oh, if it should have been one!”

“Well, it couldn’t eat us—here in the boat,” said Mollie.

“No, but it might have capsized us, and then—” Grace paused suggestively.

“All’s well that ends well,” quoted Betty, as she turned the boat nearer shore.

“Some day we must take our lunch, and have a picnic ashore. See the lovely Spanish moss hanging down from the trees. It’s like living history over again. Just think of it, how Balboa came here and discovered the land, and—”

“It wasn’t Balboa, it was Ponce de Leon who located Florida,” corrected Mollie. “Don’t you remember—Flowery Easter?”

“Oh, so it was. Well, anyhow—”

[Illustration: “THERE! THERE!” SCREAMED GRACE. “THERE’S AN ALLIGATOR!”—Page 76, *The Outdoor Girls in Florida*.]

“There—there!” screamed Grace. “There’s an alligator, surely. It’s alive, too! Oh, dear! An alligator!”

She pointed to something long and dark floating in the river—something that seemed to be covered with scales and ridges—something that suddenly turned up an ugly head, with bulging eyes, which looked fishily at the girls in the boat.

Then, with a swirl of its tail, the creature sank below the surface.

“Yes, that was an alligator,” said Betty quietly.

“I told you it was,” spoke Grace. “And to think I nearly had my hand on it. Oh, I don’t want to remember it.”

“But it didn’t bite you,” said practical Mollie.

“If it had—well, the less said the better,” remarked Betty. “Now let’s forget all about it and enjoy ourselves. Maybe there are only a few of them here in the river.”

“I wonder what alligators are good for, anyhow?” came from Amy, as she resumed her seat. “They don’t seem fit for anything.”

“You forget about alligator bags,” corrected Mollie. “What would we do for valises and satchels if we had no alligators, I’d like to know?”

“That’s so,” admitted Amy.

Grace was looking over the surface of the river as though to see if any more of the ugly creatures were in sight, but the water was unruffled save by the wind.

Not knowing the character of the stream Betty did not want to venture to far. So, after going down about a mile or so, she turned the boat and headed up stream. They passed a number of small boats, manned by colored boys who were fishing, and the youngsters suspended operations to gaze with mingled wonder and fear at Betty’s swiftly-moving craft.

They tied up at the small dock which extended out into the river at the foot of the orange grove, well satisfied with their first trip, even though they had been frightened by the alligators.

“Yes, you will find one or two ‘gators, now and then,” said Mr. Hammond, the overseer, when told of the girls’ experience. “But they won’t bother you, especially in a big boat. Don’t worry.”

But Grace was so nervous that night that she did not sleep well, and Mrs. Stonington grew quite alarmed. Perhaps it was as much worry over the fate of Will, as the recollection of her escape from the alligator, that disturbed Grace.

For no good news had come from Mr. Ford. He had set many influences at work on the case, but so far nothing had come of his inquiries.



Will seemed to have been taken into the interior of Florida, and there lost. There were so many turpentine camps, or places where contract labor was used to get out valuable wood, or other products, that a complete inquiry would take a long time.

Mrs. Ford was as well as could be expected, Grace's father wrote, though naturally very much worried. And Grace was worried too. If she could have engaged actively in a search for her brother perhaps she might not have fretted so. But it was harassing to sit idly by and let others do the work.

"Especially when we have already done so much," said Betty, agreeing with her chum's view of the case.

Watching the work of gathering oranges, occasionally themselves helping somewhat, taking walks, drives and trips in the motor boat, made time for the girls pass quickly.

Then, one day, Betty said:

"Girls, we must go on a picnic. Take our lunch and go down the river in the boat. Go ashore and eat. We will do some exploring."

"And perhaps find the fountain of youth that Ponce de Leon missed," added Mollie.

"If you find it, bring some of the water back," begged Mr. Stonington. "You girls will not need it—I do."

"We'll bottle some for you," promised Amy, laughing.

Soon they were off in the Gem again, Grace, at least, keeping a wary eye out for alligators. But they saw none of the unprepossessing creatures.

"Though perhaps we may meet with a sea-cow," suggested Betty, as she looked for a pleasant place whereon to go ashore for lunch.

"What's a sea-cow?" asked Mollie.

"One that eats sea-weed," cried Amy.

"No, I mean a manatee," went on Betty. "Don't you remember the big creatures we saw in the New York aquarium a year or so ago?"

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Amy. "Well, they're not as bad as alligators—at least they haven't such large mouths."

"And they only eat—grass," added Mollie.

Betty was sending her boat ahead at good speed, scanning the shores of the river for some quiet cove into which to steer. The day was warm, and the sun shone down unclouded. From the banks came the odor of flowers.

Suddenly, as the boat chugged along, there came a momentary halt, as though it had struck something.



“What’s that?” cried Grace.

“Maybe an alligator has us,” suggested Mollie with a laugh. For the Gem went on as though nothing had happened.

“Don’t be silly!” chided Grace. “It was certainly something.”

Betty looked back a bit nervously, and glanced at the engine.

“I hope the gasoline isn’t giving out,” she murmured.

“The idea!” cried Grace.

Then with a shock that threw all the girls forward in their seats the Gem came to a sudden halt, and the engine raced furiously. Betty at once shut off the power.

“Oh, oh!” cried Grace. “What is it? Has an alligator got hold of us?”

Betty looked over the bow. Then she said grimly:

“We’ve run on a sand bar—that’s all. Run on it good and hard, too. I wonder if we can get off?”

