

# THE OUTDOOR GIRLS IN FLORIDA

BY LAURA LEE HOPE

## CHAPTER XI: INTO THE INTERIOR

“Oh, dear!” cried Grace, as she shrank back against Betty. “Oh, dear.”

“Those—those men,” breathed Amy, who also seemed to be looking about for some sort of physical support. “See, Betty!”

They both seemed to depend on the “Little Captain” in this emergency. As for Mollie, her dark eyes flashed, and she looked at Betty with a nod of encouragement. Whatever happened, these two would stand together, at any rate.

“Don’t be silly!” exclaimed Betty, stilling the wild beating of her own heart by the reflection that she must be brave for the sake of others.

“But they are coming right toward us!” gasped Grace, making a move as though to hide in the cabin.

“Of course they are!” exclaimed Mollie, quickly. “They are going to help us; aren’t they, Betty?”

“I’m sure I hope so,” was the low-voiced answer. “One thing, girls, speak very carefully. Sound carries very distinctly over water, you know.”

“They are coming toward us,” added Amy, shrinking closer to Betty. There was no doubt of that. The eyes of all in the approaching motor boat, which was a powerful craft, were fixed on the girls in the Gem, and it was a strange sight to see the eyes of the colored men, with so much of the white showing in contrast to their dark faces, staring fixedly at our friends. Grace caught herself in a half-hysterical laugh.

“They looked just like those queer china dolls,” she explained afterward.

The white man steering the boat was almost as dark in complexion as were his companions, but at least he was white—the girls were sure of that.

“I guess they know we have run on a sand bar,” Betty explained, in as calm a voice as she could bring to her need. “They are avoiding it themselves.”

As she spoke the other boat made a wide sweep and then, having gone down past the Gem, it again swept in on a curve, now being headed up stream.

“Stuck?” called the white steersman, and his voice was not unpleasant, though a bit domineering, Betty thought.

“But perhaps this is because he is used to giving orders,” she reflected.

“Yes; we are on a sand bar, I’m afraid,” she answered, and smiled.

“Look natural!” she commanded to the others a moment later, her voice not reaching the men in the other craft, she felt sure, for the clutch of the relief boat had been thrown out and the engine was racing, making considerable noise. “Look as though we expected this,” Betty commanded. “There’s nothing to fear. We are not far from home.”

“Lots of folks get stuck on that bar,” went on the man, who was bringing his boat into a position favorable for giving aid to the Gem. “It ought to be buoyed, or marked in some way. You’re strangers around here, I take it,” he went on.

“Yes, from Mr. Stonington’s orange grove,” said Betty, simply. “If you will kindly pull us off this bar we will gladly pay you for your trouble.”

Was it fancy, or did Betty detect fierce and eager gleams in the eyes of the colored men?

“Oh, shucks!” exclaimed the steersman, quickly. “I’ve pulled lots of bigger boats than yours off that bar. And not for pay, neither. Can you catch a rope?”

“Oh, yes,” said Mollie, quickly, determined to second Betty’s efforts to appear at ease. “We’ve done considerable cruising.”

“That’s good. Well, you want to know this river before you do much more. It’s treacherous. Sam, throw that rope while I put us up a little closer,” he commanded.

“Yes, boss,” was the reply of a big colored man in the bow.

Both Mollie and Betty grasped for the rope as it came uncoiling toward them.

“That’s good,” complimented the man. “Now can you make it fast? Have you a ring-bolt there?”

“No, but there’s a deck-cleat,” spoke Betty.

“Just the same. Now, then, I’m going to turn about and try to haul you off, pointing my bow down stream. This boat works better on the direct clutch than in reverse. And when I start to pull, you’d better reverse your motor. Can you do it?”

“Oh, yes,” answered Betty.

“Good. You do know something about boats. So you’re from the orange grove; eh? I heard the new owner had come on. Need any men down there?” and he seemed quite business-like.

“I—I don’t know,” faltered Betty, looking at Amy. “Mr. Stonington hasn’t told us anything about that. This is his niece,” and she nodded at Amy.

“Oh, is that so! Well, if he should happen to need any pickers, I can supply him. Hank Belton is my name. I supply laborers for lots of orange growers and others. I’m



the biggest dealer in labor around here; ain't I, boys?" and he appealed to the colored men.

"Dat's what you am, boss!" exclaimed one, with a chuckle.

"And I always treats my help right, no matter what happens after they hire out; don't I, boys?"

"Suah!" came in a chorus.

"So just remind Mr. Stonington about me," the man went on with what he evidently meant for a friendly smile, but which made the girls shudder. "My place is at Penbrook—about ten miles up the river. Now, then, have you that rope fast?"

"Yes," answered Betty.

"Get ready then—I'm going to pull you. And start your motor as soon as the tow rope gets taut!"

"All right," answered Betty in business-like tones.

The tow rope straightened out as the other motor boat started down stream. Betty watched, and, when she thought the proper time had come, she started her motor on the reverse.

For a moment it seemed that, even with this, the Gem would not come off the bar, and the girls looked anxiously over the side to detect the first motion.

Then there came a quiver to the stranded boat, and a shout from the colored men:

"She's movin', boss!"

"Turn on a little more gas!" cried the steersman to Betty. "I think we have her now!"

She speeded up her motor, and in another instant the Gem came free so suddenly that there was danger of a collision.

"Shut down!" called Hank Belton quickly. "You're all right now."

Betty turned off the power, and Mollie cast loose the tow rope.

"Thank you very much," she called to the man.

"I wish you would let us pay you," added Betty.

"Nary a pay, Miss," was his answer. "I'm glad I could help you. Just give my message to Mr. Stonington, and I'll be obliged to you. Better back down a bit before you turn. That bar sticks out a ways. It's a wonder you didn't hit it before. You can't draw much."

"We don't!" answered Betty.

The other boat was proceeding down stream now, the colored men looking back with their rolling eyes. Betty started her engine on the reverse again, and then, feeling sure that they were beyond the bar, she turned and steered her craft back toward the



orange grove. The picnic plan was given up now as it was getting late and the girls were tired.

“Thank goodness that’s over!” exclaimed Grace, with a sigh of relief. “Oh, I was so frightened!”

“At what?” asked Mollie.

“I—I don’t know.”

“Well, it was very kind of them,” said Betty. “We might have had to stay there a long time.”

“And I’m going to tell Uncle Stonington,” spoke Amy. “He may want to hire men, for there are many more oranges to pick.”

Grace sat thoughtfully on the cushions, neglecting even to eat her chocolates.

“A penny for your thoughts,” offered Betty.

“I was just wondering,” said Grace slowly, “that perhaps that man might know something of the labor contractor who has Will in the toils. I wish I had thought to ask.”

“That’s so!” cried Mollie. “But we can find him again. It will give us something to do, Betty. We can come up the river again.”

“And I’ll be sure to keep away from that sand bar,” declared the Little Captain.

Mr. and Mrs. Stonington were quite alarmed when the girls told of their adventure.

“They weren’t in any real danger,” declared Mr. Hammond, the overseer. “The river isn’t deep nor swift, and there are boats going up and down quite often.”

“But what about those rough men?” asked Mrs. Stonington.

“Oh, rough is the worst thing you can say against them. They aren’t really bad. Belton has the best supply of laborers around here. Probably he was taking those men down to Hanson’s grove. We will need pickers ourselves next week, Mr. Stonington, and I don’t believe we can do any better than to get them from Belton.”

“Very well, Mr. Hammond; whatever you say.”

“And that will be a chance to repay him for his kindness to us,” added Betty.

“And perhaps we can get some news of my brother,” spoke Grace, wistfully, for there had come no word from those who were searching for the missing youth.

“I’d like to go and ask myself,” went on Grace.

“Well, there’s no reason why you shouldn’t,” said Mr. Hammond. “I’ll be going up the river in a day or so, and if you think we’ll hire of Belton I’ll tell him so,” he said to Mr. Stonington.

“Yes, if you like, Mr. Hammond.”

“All right, then I’ll pilot the girls to his camp if their boat will hold me.”



“Indeed it will!” exclaimed Betty, “and you can tell me how to avoid sand bars.”

“Belton’s place is a little way into the interior from the river,” went on Mr. Hammond, “but it’s a safe road.”

“Then we’ll go,” decided Betty.

The next few days were filled with small incidents of little interest. The girls motored about, and did some fishing in the river, catching a variety of specimens, few of which were pronounced fit for the table. But they enjoyed themselves very much.

They wandered about in the orange grove, eating as much of the delicious fruit as they chose. Sometimes they took walks with Mrs. Stonington, who was slowly regaining her health. Mr. Stonington was kept busy seeing to the details of the business, that was new to him.

One night Mr. Hammond said:

“I think we’ll need those pickers to-morrow, or next day, Mr. Stonington.”

“Very well, then get them. The girls can take you up to Belton’s camp.”

“And perhaps I can get some word of Will,” observed Grace hopefully.

The trip up the river was devoid of incident, except that Betty nearly ran on another sand bar, being warned just in time by Mr. Hammond. Then they reached the landing where Belton’s boat was moored.

“That shows he’s in camp,” said the foreman, as he helped the girls tie the Gem. Then they struck off into the interior, not a few doubts tugging at the girls’ hearts. It was very wild and desolate, the Everglades being not far distant.

