

THE OUTDOOR GIRLS IN FLORIDA

BY LAURA LEE HOPE

CHAPTER XVI: SUSPICIOUS CHARACTERS

“What shall we do?” whispered Grace, glancing at Betty, who stood at the wheel, seemingly as calm and unperturbed as though she had the Gem out for a little run on Rainbow Lake. “Oh, what shall we do?”

“Do?” echoed Mollie. “Wait until there’s something to be done, of course.”

“But those men—they are heading right for us, and we don’t know them!”

“And we didn’t know Mr. Belton when he came to our rescue,” replied Mollie. “So that doesn’t count.”

“But neither of these men is Mr. Belton,” went on Grace. “Oh, I don’t like Florida as much as I thought I would!”

“I’m sorry,” spoke Amy gently.

“I—I didn’t mean just that, my dear,” answered Grace impulsively. “But they are heading for us, Betty.”

“Of course they are,” said the Little Captain.

“But that doesn’t mean I am going to stop for them.”

“Betty Nelson! Do you mean that you aren’t going to stop?” gasped Grace.

“That’s what I do mean. I don’t see why we should halt our boat just because two strange men signal us. Indeed I’m not going to!” and Betty turned on more power. She gazed straight ahead as though she did not see the men in the approaching craft, who were now wildly waving their hands, and turning their rather disreputable-looking craft in the direction of the Gem.

“Betty Nelson! You’re just splendid!” cried Grace impulsively as she moved forward and threw her arms about her chum. “I wish I had your courage!”

“Don’t hug me too tightly,” begged Betty with a laugh. “I may have to steer out of their way.”

Indeed it did seem so, for the other craft was coming about so as to almost cross the bows of the boat of the outdoor girls. Then one of the men called:

“I say, young ladies, will you stop a minute? We want to speak to you.”

Betty never turned her head, but gazed on down the river as though intent on not grounding on a sand bar, or running into an alligator. Her chums followed her example, but Grace could not forbear giving the men one glance.

“They’re talking together,” she reported in a low voice.

“Let ‘em talk—as long as they don’t talk to us,” answered Mollie.

The men seemed to have decided on something after a conference, for the one who had first hailed the girls now called again:

“I say, young ladies, we don’t mean to be impolite or to bother you, but we’re looking for a boat, and—”

“This boat isn’t for sale,” said Betty in non-committal tones. “We have no time to stop.”

“But you don’t understand,” cried the man, seemingly growing desperate. “One of our boats was taken last night by a young fellow, and he came down the river. We followed him, but we must have passed him in the night. Now we’re on our way back. He may have hid in some bayou, and be on his way down farther up stream. All we wanted to know was if you had seen a tall young fellow, with blue eyes, in a small skiff?”

Betty returned no answer. It was not a question, strictly speaking. The men had merely said they wanted to know, and Betty saw no reason for gratifying their “want.”

“Hey, can’t you stop and answer a civil question?” cried the second man, and his voice was angry. “If you don’t we may—”

Betty’s cheeks flushed. Without turning her head she answered:

“You’d better be careful how you make threats. We are from Mr. Stonington’s orange grove, and Mr. Hammond—”

“There, I knew you’d make a mess of it, Bill!” said the other man—the one who had first spoken—and he turned accusingly to his companion.

“Well, I don’t care—why don’t they answer? I’ll wager they’ve seen that fellow and won’t tell.”

“Why shouldn’t they tell?” asked the first man in a low voice, but he forgot how well even low tones carry over the water. “They are strangers here I am certain. They can’t know ‘The Loon,’ and so we’re perfectly safe in questionin’ ‘em.”

“Yes, but they won’t answer. Git over closer and maybe we can make ‘em!”

“Oh!” gasped Grace, startled.

“They’d better not try!” cried Mollie with a sparkle in her eyes. “We’re not very far from home, and this boat can go twice as fast as theirs.”

“Don’t be alarmed,” said Betty. “I’ve got some speed in reserve yet.”



The men consulted together again. They had put their boat about now, and were coming down after the Gem. But it was easy to see they had no speed.

“I say!” called out the man who had first hailed. “Won’t you tell us if you’ve seen a ragged lad in a boat? We don’t mean any harm. Just stop a minute!”

“We have no time!” said Betty sharply, “and if you persist in following us—”

“Say, look here!” blustered the second man, “if you gals don’t—”

“Now let up on that line, Bill!” cautioned the other. “We don’t mean any harm,” he proceeded. “My friend here is a bit rough—”

“I’m no rougher than you!” retorted his companion.

“We’re willing to pay for the information,” went on the first man. “It won’t take but a minute—”

But Betty stayed to hear no more. She opened wide the throttle of her motor, and the Gem shot ahead, leaving the other craft far behind. There was some evidence in the quicker staccato exhaust of the pursuing boat that the occupants tried to get more speed out of her, but they failed, and a little later Amy, turning around, saw them circling back up stream.

One man stood up and shook his fist vindictively at the girls. Grace gasped as she saw this.

“Oh, I am sure they mean us some harm!” she cried.

“Nonsense!” asserted Betty. “We’re far enough off now.”

“But if we come out again?” Amy suggested.

“I think we will take one of the young men from the orange crate factory,” suggested Mollie. “Mr. Hammond will spare us one, I’m sure, and it would be too bad if we had to give up our trips on the river just because some men are hunting a fugitive.”

“And I wonder what they want of him?” asked Grace. “He seemed harmless enough.”

“They said he had their boat,” supplied Amy.

“Yes, that was probably to escape in,” suggested Grace. “He was going for help for someone. Maybe a friend of his was hurt. I wish someone could take help to my brother. Oh, it’s dreadful to think he may be in need of it, and that we are unable to get to him.”

“It certainly is,” agreed Betty. “But fretting will do no good. We may have news of him any time now.”



A little later the girls tied up at the orange grove dock. They made light of their adventures, even the one with the sea cow, and did not mention the ragged youth at all, except to say a stranger had recovered their boat for them.

“For there is no need of telling too many persons that we saw him,” said Betty later. “Some of the hands might hear of it and, without meaning to, betray his secret.”

“But we don’t know where he went,” said Grace.

“No, and I don’t want to—then we can’t tell under any circumstances. We’ll just keep quiet about it.”

For a day or so the girls did not venture far from the bungalow on the river, but soon they tired of comparative inactivity and planned a little cruise, down stream this time, past Lake Chad, and up another river that emptied into it.

“But you’d better take one of my young helpers along,” suggested Mr. Hammond, when the girls made known their plan. “There have been a couple of suspicious characters hanging around of late, and I don’t want you to take any chances. I’ll give you a young fellow you can depend on.”

