

THE OUTDOOR GIRLS IN FLORIDA

BY LAURA LEE HOPE

CHAPTER XXV: WILL FORD

“Slow up a little, Betty. Now ahead to starboard! Reverse! I have it!”

Thus cried Mollie, who stood at the bow of the Gem with a boathook in her grasp, while the motor craft approached the rude raft on which lay the body of an unconscious youth. Mollie had caught the hook in the edge of the boards and the motor boat was now beside it.

“What—what are we going to do with him?” asked Amy.

“Get him aboard, of course,” said Betty, shortly. She was busy making fast a line to a projection on the raft. The Gem was now drifting with the craft containing the young man.

“We never can!” cried Grace. “Oh, perhaps he’s—”

She did not say what she thought.

“We’ve just got to get him up here, and take him to a doctor,” declared Betty, fiercely. “He looks half-starved.”

There was a moment of hesitation among the girls—a natural hesitation—and then Betty and Mollie with an understanding look at each other climbed from the boat to the raft. It was big and strong enough to support much more weight; for, though it was rudely made, it was substantial, being composed of tree trunks, and boards, bound together with withes, forest vines, and bits of rope.

“He—he’s breathing—anyhow,” said Mollie, softly.

“Yes, we—we must lift him up,” spoke Betty. “Come on.”

They exposed the pale and drawn face of the youth on the raft. At the sight of it Grace, who with Amy was leaning breathlessly over the side of the boat, uttered a cry.

“It’s Will!” she screamed, half-hysterically. “It’s my brother Will!”

Betty and Mollie started back, and nearly let the limp body slip off the raft.

“What—what!” cried Betty, for the figure of the youth bore no resemblance to Will; nor did the features. But the eyes of a sister were not to be deceived.

“It is Will!” she cried. “I have been hoping and praying all the while that it might be he—and it is. It’s Will!”

She would have gotten down to the raft had not Amy restrained her.

“I believe it is Will,” said Mollie, taking a closer look. “We have found him.”

“Then let’s get him aboard at once, and help him,” said practical Betty. “Amy, start that coffee. Grace, you help us! And Harry, too!”

Thus the Little Captain issued her orders.

How they got Will Ford aboard the boat the girls could not tell afterward. But they did, with The Loon’s aid, and soon he was being given hot coffee. Slowly his senses came back, and when some warm broth had been slowly fed to him he opened his eyes, looked wonderingly about him, and asked hoarsely:

“Is it real—or am I dreaming again?”

“It’s real, Will dear,” said Grace, putting her arms about him, as he lay in one of the bunks. “Oh, to think that we have found you again! Where have you been, and what happened to you?”

“Where haven’t I been?” he asked, smiling a little. “And what hasn’t happened to me?”

“But you’re all right now,” said Grace, comfortingly.

“But what in the world are you girls doing down here?” Will asked, wonderingly. “It’s like a dream. How did you come here?”

“To rescue you,” replied Mollie, with a laugh.

“Really?”

“Well, almost really.”

Will grew better every minute and wanted to tell his story, but the girls insisted on waiting, except for the most important details, until he had reached the orange grove. To satisfy him, however, they told how they came to be in Florida.

As for The Loon, no sooner had he a sight of Will’s face than he danced about like a child, and cried:

“That’s him! That’s the one! He’s the one I went to get help for!”

“That’s right, my boy,” said Will, weakly.

“I—I lost the money and note,” faltered poor Harry. “But I thought you had fooled me.”

“But, after all, he was the means of saving Tom, and, in a way, you, also,” said Grace.

“Who’s Tom?” asked Will.

And they told him.



That there was surprise at Orangeade when the outdoor girls arrived with Will Ford can easily be imagined. The first thing done was to send a telegram to Mr. Ford, apprising him that his son was found.

Then Will told his story.

The first part the girls were already familiar with—how, tiring of life in Uncle Isaac's mill, he had determined to strike out for himself.

"Then I fell in with a plausible talker," explained Will, "and he persuaded me he had a great scheme for making money. Well, before I knew it I had signed some papers—foolishly. At first I was given decent clerical work to do, and then the scheme failed, I was transferred to another part of the State, and to another company, and in some way, by a juggling of contracts, not knowing what I was doing, it seems that I signed an agreement to work in a timber camp. Say, it was worse than being in prison, and some of the fellows were prisoners, I heard. There were one or two others like myself; but we couldn't get away.

"Then I wrote that letter to dad and threw it out of the car window. From then on I've lived a dog's life. I've been a regular slave. Many a time I'd have given anything to be back, even with Uncle Isaac. This has been a lesson to me."

Will went on to tell how he had been taken from place to place with the others until he finally was held in the Everglade swamp, and made to get out timber from the forest.

"I thought it was all up with me then," he said. "Before that I had met this chap," and he nodded toward The Loon. "I thought he could help me, and he promised to. I managed to speak to him on the quiet, and gave him what money I had managed to hide away from those slave-drivers. He went off, promising to bring help."

"And he tried, too," said Grace. "He helped us first, though." And she told of getting the motor boat away from the manatee.

"Just to think!" cried Will. "There he was, talking to you girls all the while, and me only a few miles away, though I was moved later."

"I—I'm sorry," spoke The Loon.

"Oh, you couldn't help it, Harry," voiced Betty, softly. "After all, it came out all right, and you helped a lot."

"Indeed he did," agreed Tom Osborne. "Only for him Will and I might still be prisoners."

Will related how he had broken from the shack shortly before the rescuers reached the Everglade camp, and how, after much suffering, having previously cut his foot, which made him lame, and wandering about in the woods, he had made the raft and



floated down the river. What little food he had gave out, and he had fainted from weakness and exposure just as the girls' boat came in sight.

"But we have you back again," declared Grace.

"Yes, and you can make up your minds I'm not going to be so foolish again," spoke her brother. "This has been a lesson to me—one I won't forget in a hurry."

"Well, now you can stay with us and have a good time," said his sister. "I guess you need it."

"I sure do," said Will, fervently.

On hearing Will's story Mr. Hammond and Mr. Stonington went to the authorities again, to proceed against the unscrupulous men who had so mistreated him.

But they had left that part of the State, and could not be traced. One reason, Will thought, why they held him a prisoner, was because they had violated the law in regard to the treatment of the working-prisoners, and did not want to be reported. And the reason The Loon's description of Will gave no clue to the girls was because of Grace's brother's temporary lameness, and his change due to poor living and ragged clothes.

Then came happy days. Mr. and Mrs. Ford, rejoicing over the news of their son being found, sent word for him to stay with the girls, and they would join him in Florida. As for the girls—Mollie, Amy and Betty shared with Grace the fun of showing Will about the lovely place where they had spent the winter.

The Loon found a comfortable home with one of Mr. Hammond's workers, and made himself very useful about the orange grove. He could not do enough for the girls, or for Will and Tom, the latter two becoming fast chums, as they had been companions in misery.

"And to think that soon we will have to leave this lovely place," said Grace one day, when they had come back from a long trip on the river in the Gem. "It is perfect here."

"It is," agreed Mollie, "but do you know I am rather lonesome for the sight of a snowball, or an icicle."

"Mollie Billette!" cried Amy.

"Well, I am! Too much loveliness palls on one after a bit. Of course it's lovely here, Amy, but we are Northern girls, and one winter in the South can't change us."

"Well, we have certainly had some strange adventures here," remarked Betty, as she swung her boat up to the dock.

"And with all the orange blossoms, none of us has worn any yet," remarked Grace, laughing.



“Oh, I don’t know,” said Mollie, with a mischievous look at Betty. “I think some of us have a chance. I saw Tom Osborne out in the moonlight with you last night, Grace.”

“You did not!”

“Yes, I did, and he—”

“Have a chocolate!” capitulated Grace.

And now the time has come to take leave of the outdoor girls—at least for a time. Perhaps we may meet them again, under other circumstances. For they are destined to have other adventures, fully as absorbing as those I have already set down.

THE END

