The Outdoor Girls in Florida

by Laura Lee Hope

Chapter I: Bad News

"Why, Grace, what in the world is the matter? You've been crying!"

"Yes, I have, Betty. But don't mind me. It's all so sudden. Come in. I shall be all right presently. Don't mind!"

Grace Ford tried to repress her emotion, but the cause of her tears was evidently too recent, or the effort at self-control too much for her, for she gave way to another outburst, sobbing this time on the shoulder of Betty Nelson, who patted her sympathetically, and murmured soothingly to her chum.

"But what is it, Grace?" Betty asked, after waiting a minute.

"I—I'll tell you in a moment or two, Betty. Just—just wait," and the tall, graceful girl made a more successful effort to master her feelings.

"Here come Amy and Mollie," went on Betty, as she glanced from the library window and saw two girls walking up the path opened across the lawn through the mass of newly fallen snow. "Do you want to meet them, Grace; or shall I say you don't feel well—have a headache? They'll understand. And perhaps in a little while—"

"No—no, Betty. It's sweet of you to want to help me; but Amy and Mollie might just as well know now as later. I'll be able to see them—in a little while. It—it's all so sudden."

"But what does it all mean, Grace? I can't understand. Is anyone dead—or—or hurt?" and Betty Nelson, who had called at the house of Grace to talk over plans for a dance they were going to attend the following week, looked anxiously at her chum. Only the day before Grace had seemed like her nearly-always jolly self. She and her three chums, including Betty, had been down town shopping, and Grace, as usual, had indulged in chocolates—her one failing, if such it can be called.

"Surely she can't be ill," thought Betty. "Ill from too many chocolates? I've seen her take twice as many as she did yesterday, and she doesn't look ill."

With this half-formed thought in her mind Betty looked more critically at her chum. Aside from the tears—which seldom add to a girl's beauty—there was no change in Grace Ford.

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That is, no change except one caused by something rather mysterious, Betty thought—something that was hard for Grace to tell, but which had deeply affected her.

There came a ring at the door. Betty started toward it from the library, where she and Grace had gone when Grace let her chum in a short time before.

"Shall I answer, Grace?" inquired Betty, hesitating.

"Yes, do, please. I think Katy is with mamma. She took the news very much to heart. Let Amy and Mollie in, and then I'll tell you all about it. Oh, but I don't know what to do!"

"Now look here, Grace Ford!" exclaimed Betty briskly, pausing a moment on her way to the door. "You just stop this! If no one is dead, and no one is hurt, then it can't be so very dreadful. You just stop now, and when we all get together we'll help you in whatever trouble you have. You know that; don't you?"

"Oh, yes, Betty, I do. You aren't the 'Little Captain' to all of us for nothing. I'll try and not cry any more."

"Do. It—it isn't at all becoming. Your nose is positively like a—lobster!"

"It is not, Betty Nelson!" Grace flared.

"It certainly is. Look in the glass if you don't believe me. There—take my chamois and give it a little rub before I let in Amy and Mollie. It's only nice, clean talcum—you needn't think it's powder."

"All right—as if talcum wasn't powder, though," and Grace smiled through the traces of her recent tears.

"That's better," decided Betty, with a nod of her shapely head and a bright look from her sparkling eyes. "Yes, I'll be there in a moment," she called as there came another ring at the bell.

"Shall I bring them right in, Grace?" she called over her shoulder, as she neared the door.

"Yes—yes. I might as well—have it over with," faltered the weeping one.

"Gracious, you'd think someone was going to be hanged, or beheaded, or sent to the galleys for life—or some other dreadful thing such as we read of in our ancient histories," commented Betty. "Cheer up, Grace. There may be worse to come."

"It's awfully good of you, Betty, to try and cheer me, only, if you understood—but there—let them in. They must be perishing!"

"Oh, it isn't so cold. You don't feel well, that's all. Hello, Amy—Mollie. Come in!" she greeted the other girls, at the same time endeavoring by nods and winks to convey some idea that all was not well with Grace.

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But if Betty hoped to convey a quiet intimation that something out of the ordinary had happened she did not succeed. In her eagerness to warn the newcomers not to ask questions she overdid it, and succeeded only in making them alarmed.

"What—what is it?" asked Mollie, in a sort of stage whisper.

"Oh, nothing like that," said Betty, seeing that she was only making matters worse.

"Who—who is—" began Amy.

"No one!" said Betty, half-sharply. "Don't put on such a mournful look, Amy. But Grace has had some bad news, I expect, so I let you in."

"Bad news!" echoed Mollie.

"What kind?" inquired Amy.

"I don't know—yet. She's going to tell us."

The two newcomers, divesting themselves of their rubbers, walked on tiptoe toward the library, preceded by Betty. The latter heard their cautious approach and turned on them quickly.

"Nobody's asleep!" she exclaimed. "Why don't you act—naturally?"

"Why don't you, yourself, Betty Nelson?" demanded Mollie Billette, quickly, her dark eyes flashing. "You meet us as if—as if something terrible had happened, and because we live up to the part, and behave ourselves, you—"

"Hush, please," begged gentle Amy, for well she knew Mollie's failing—an exceedingly quick temper.

"I beg your pardon," spoke Mollie, contritely. "I forgot myself."

"That's all right," said Betty, with a smile. "I don't blame you. But we must all help Grace now. She feels very bad."

As the three entered the library they saw their chum standing near a window, looking out over the snow-covered lawn. Grace did not turn at the approach of her friends.

Then Amy stole softly up to her, and, reaching up her arms, tried to put them around Grace's neck. But Grace was tall, while Amy was rather short, so the little act of kindness could not be carried out.

Mollie laughed a little. She could not help it.

Amy flushed. She was rather sensitive on the point of her stature.

"Don't mind them, Amy," said Grace quickly, as she turned about, placing her own arms around the other. "I know I am too tall, and I seem to keep on growing. Hello, Mollie dear. I'm so glad you came," and she kissed the two newcomers.

Her eyes filled with tears again, seeing which Betty called out:

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"Now, Grace, remember you promised not to do that any more. Just be brave, and tell us all about it; that is, if we can help you in any manner."

"I—I don't know whether you can or not," spoke Grace slowly, "but I'll tell you just the same. It's—it's about my brother Will!"

She paused a moment, catching her breath as she gave this piece of information.

"Has he—has he—" began Betty, hoping to make it easier for Grace to tell.

"No, he hasn't done anything to attract public attention this time," went on Grace. "But he has run away."

"Run away!"

It was a surprised chorus from the three visitors.

"Yes he has left Uncle Isaac's home—stopped work in the cotton mill, and gone—no one knows where."

"Why, Grace!" exclaimed Mollie. "Do you really mean it?"

Grace nodded. She could not speak for a moment.

"How did it happen?" asked Betty.

"Who told you?" Amy wanted to know.

"Uncle Isaac himself told us," resumed Grace, after a pause. "As for how it happened we don't know yet. Uncle Isaac is on his way now to give us some particulars. He just telephoned to mamma, and that is what upset us all. I have sent for papa to come home from the office. He will be here to meet Uncle Isaac I hope. Oh, isn't it dreadful!"

"But perhaps it is only some boyish prank," suggested Betty hopefully. "What are the particulars? Perhaps he has only gone off with some friends, and will come back again, just as he did the—other time."

"The other time," as Betty called it was rather a delicate subject with the Ford family, for Will with some chums had gotten into a little difficulty not long before this story opens, and the present complication was an outcome of that. I shall describe them in order presently.

"No, I don't believe it is a prank this time," went on Grace. "He has been gone some time, and we never knew it until Uncle Isaac mentioned it casually over the telephone. Oh, I wish he would come! We can't do a thing until we hear the particulars. Then papa will start an inquiry, I think. Poor Will! I hope he is not—not hurt!" and again Grace showed symptoms of tears.

"Now stop that!" commanded the Little Captain sharply. "You know it does no good to worry. Wait until you have some real facts to go on."

"Yes, do," urged Mollie.

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"But he isn't your brother," said Grace in retort. "How would you like it, Mollie Billette, if Paul should be missing some day?"

"Oh, I'd feel dreadful, of course. But Paul and Dodo get into so many scrapes," she added, with a curious shrug of her shoulders, in which she betrayed her French ancestry—"so very many scrapes, my dears, that we are past being shocked."

But, for all Mollie spoke so lightly, she knew—and so did her chums—that should anything happen to the twins Mollie would be the first to show emotion.

"Have you heard no word from Will himself?" asked Betty, after a pause.

"Not a word, and that makes it seem all the worse. If we only had some word—something to go by, we might not feel so bad. But it came like a bolt out of a blue sky—what Uncle Isaac telephoned about an hour ago. He is down town attending to business, and he said he'd come up as soon as he could. He was surprised himself, to know that Will was not home."

"Then he knew that he had left Atlanta?" asked Mollie.

"Yes, but he supposed Will had started back home."

"I'm afraid I don't exactly understand it all," said Amy in a low voice. "You know I've been away, and—"

"Oh, of course!" exclaimed Grace. "I forgot that you had been off with that newly-found brother of yours. Well, you see, Amy, Will disgraced himself a while ago—"

"I don't call it much of a disgrace," said Betty in defense of the absent one.

"Well, papa did," said Grace. "I thought perhaps he was a little too severe on Will, but mamma said it was best to be severe at the start."

"What did he do?" asked Amy.

"I didn't hear all the particulars," went on Grace. "But you know that new Latin teacher the High School boys have—Professor Cark, his name is."

Amy nodded.

"Well, the boys didn't like him from the very start," proceeded Grace, "and I guess he didn't like the boys any too well. They played some tricks on him, and he retaliated by doubling up on their lessons. Then one night he was kidnapped—taken from his boarding place and hazed. It was nothing very bad, but the faculty held a meeting, and voted to expel all the boys concerned in it. Will was one, and papa was so angry that he said he would punish Will in a way he wouldn't forget. He said he'd take him out of school, before he'd have him expelled, and make him lose a term.

"So poor Will was given his choice of starting the study of law in papa's office, or going to work for Uncle Isaac Ford—papa's brother. Uncle Isaac has a big cotton mill down in Atlanta, Georgia, you know. Papa thought it would be a good thing for Will to

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see what hard work meant. At the same time it would take him away from Deepdale, and out of the influence of some of the boys who were responsible for the hazing. I don't believe Will was one of the ringleaders."

"And did he go South?" asked Amy.

"He did. He chose to work for Uncle Isaac instead of studying law here. And for the past month or so he has been in the mill. Then, all of a sudden, he disappears."

"But how?" asked Mollie.

"We don't know the particulars," said Grace. "We supposed up to about an hour ago, that Will was in Atlanta, though we wondered why he didn't write. But then he never was very good at sending letters. Then came this 'phone message. I answered and I was surprised to hear Uncle Isaac speaking.

"At first I thought he was talking from Atlanta, and I was afraid something had happened. But Uncle Isaac said he was here—in Deepdale, and then he startled me by asking how Will was.

"'Why, isn't he down in your mill?' I asked. Uncle Isaac said he was not—that Will had not come to work one morning, and had left a note saying that he was going to quit. Of course Uncle Isaac thought Will had come back home. But when I told him we had not seen my brother, why, Uncle Isaac was as startled as I was. He said he'd come right up here and tell us all he knew."

Grace paused. She had spoken rather at length.

"Well, that is rather strange," murmured Mollie.

"But of course it may be easily explained when your Uncle comes," said Betty.

"There he is now!" cried Grace, glancing out of a window. "And he has papa with him. He must have stopped at the office. Oh, I'm so glad papa is here!" and she hurried to the front door to let them in.

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