

THE OUTDOOR GIRLS IN FLORIDA

BY LAURA LEE HOPE

CHAPTER II: GOOD NEWS

“Oh, father!” gasped Grace, as she slipped into his waiting arms. Hardly a greeting did she give to Uncle Isaac, but perhaps this was on account of having spoken to him over the telephone shortly before. “Oh, father! Where is poor Will?”

“I don’t know, Grace,” answered Mr. Ford gently. “But don’t worry. We shall find him. How is your mother?”

“Oh, she feels it dreadfully of course. She’s been wanting you so much.”

“I came as soon as I could. Your Uncle Isaac stopped for me after telephoning the news to you.”

“Yes, I allowed that was the best procedure,” said Mr. Ford Sr., he being the elder brother of the father of Grace. Uncle Isaac spoke with a slight Southern accent, but not very pronounced, since he had lived most of his life in the North.

“I’ll see your mother first, Grace, and then we’ll discuss what’s best to be done,” went on Mr. Ford. “It was rather a shock to me.”

“Oh, father! I hope nothing has happened to poor Will!” sighed Grace.

“Well, if there has, he brought it on himself,” said Uncle Isaac sharply. “He had a good place with me, and he could have stayed there and learned the business. Instead of that he chose to act like a—”

“Never mind, Isaac,” spoke Mr. Ford quickly. “The thing is done, and we’ll have to make the best of it. Perhaps I acted a bit hastily in sending him to you.”

“It would have done him good if he had stayed with me. But boys are so foolish.”

“And I presume you and I were—at Will’s age,” said the father. “Well, I’ll go see your mother, Grace, and then I’ll be down again. Is someone here?” and he looked at the rubbers in the hall.

“Yes, Betty, Mollie and Amy.”

“Oh, that’s all right. You can stay with them until I come down. Isaac, if you are hungry I’ll have some lunch sent up.”

“Not for me. I never eat between meals,” and Uncle Isaac spoke with firmness.

As Betty looked out of a crack in the library door she made up her mind that Mr. Ford's brother seldom did anything "between meals." He seemed to be a man who lived by hard and fast rules, and he had not the most kindly face and manner in the world. He was quite a contrast to Grace's father.

"Maybe that's why Will left him," mused Betty. "I'm sure he looks as if he would be a hard master. Poor Will!"

"I'll just sit in here and look at the paper," went on Uncle Isaac, starting toward the library.

"The girls—my chums—are in there," said Grace quickly. "Of course, if you—"

"Excuse me!" interrupted Uncle Isaac. "I'll meet them later, after your father and I have straightened out this tangle—if it can be done. I'll sit in the parlor, though I'm not used to it. No use wearing out the best carpet. Is anyone in the dining room?"

"They are getting ready for dinner," said Grace with a smile, to which the elderly man did not respond. "I guess you'll have to go to the parlor, Uncle Isaac. Of course we'll entertain you, but—"

"No, I'd rather look over the paper. Go along, Jim, and comfort Margaret all you can. I'm sure it wasn't my fault—"

"Of course not, Isaac. I'll be back presently," and Mr. Ford started for his wife's room. Grace rejoined her chums, and Uncle Isaac went to the parlor.

And, while the scene is thus cleared for a moment I will take advantage of it to make my new readers somewhat better acquainted with the characters and setting of this story.

The initial volume of this series was "The Outdoor Girls of Deepdale; Or, Camping and Tramping for Fun and Health," and in that was related how Betty, Amy, Mollie and Grace had gone on a walking trip, and how they solved the strange secret of a five hundred dollar bill.

The second book brought our heroines into the midst of summer, and also saw them started on a voyage in Betty's motor boat. This book, called: "The Outdoor Girls at Rainbow Lake; Or, the Stirring Cruise of the Motor Boat Gem," had to do, in a measure, with a curious happening on an island, following the strange loss of some valuable papers, when a horse Grace was riding ran away with her. And how the papers were recovered—but there. It would not be "playing the game" to go into details now.

"The Outdoor Girls in a Motor Car; Or, The Haunted Mansion of Shadow Valley," was the third book of the series. As the sub-title indicates there really was a house where strange manifestations took place, and when Mollie was captured by the "ghost," her chums were very much alarmed.



The adventures of our friends in the touring car, which Mollie owned, carried them well into Fall, and when the first snow came, and the girls had the chance to go to the woods, they took advantage of the opportunity. In the fourth book, “The Outdoor Girls in a Winter Camp; Or, Glorious Days on Skates and Ice boats,” there was related how a certain property dispute, involving Mr. Ford, was settled through good luck favoring the girls. Also how Amy was claimed by a brother, of whose existence she was unaware.

They had been back from camp some little time now, when the strange disappearance of Will Ford gave them new food for thought and action.

“Oh, if we only could find him for you, Grace!” exclaimed Betty, when her chum had returned to the library, after greeting her father. “If we only could.”

“Yes. If only we could pick him up, as we did that five hundred dollar bill,” added Mollie.

“We might,” said Amy, half seriously.

And the girls discussed this possibility—one not so remote as might seem at first, since they had done many strange things of late.

A word or two more before I go on.

The girls, as I have intimated, lived in the city of Deepdale, in the heart of the Empire State. Deepdale—Dear Deepdale as the girls called it—lived up to its name. It was a charming town, with some country features that made it all the nicer. It nestled in a bend of the Argono River, a stream of some importance commercially.

The four girls I have already named—Grace Ford, Mollie Billette, Betty Nelson and Amy. In the first volume the latter was Amy Stonington, but a mystery concerning her had been solved, and a brother who had long sought her, at last found her. He was Henry Blackford, who was concerned in the five hundred dollar bill mystery, and he recognized Amy as his sister in a peculiar way. So Amy Stonington became Amy Blackford, and Mr. and Mrs. John Stonington, instead of being her uncle and aunt, were mere strangers to her.

No, not mere strangers, either, for they had not brought her up from a baby to so easily relinquish her now. They could not bear to give her up, and as she had no other relatives, except her brother, as far as she knew, and as he had to travel about considerably in his business, Amy remained with those she had so long regarded as her parents. She was very glad to do so.

Betty was the only child, while Grace had, as I have mentioned, a brother Will. Mollie had a small brother and sister—the twins, Dora (or “Dodo”) and Paul. Her



mother was a well-to-do widow, and the parents of the other girls were wealthy, but made no display of their means.

As I have noted, Will's foolish prank had brought its punishment, though perhaps he did not merit it as much as did some of his chums. One, Frank Haley, had been expelled, and another had been suspended for three weeks. But to Will would seem to have come the heavier punishment, now that he was away from home, no one knew where.

Mr. Ford came down from his wife's room. Grace glided out to him.

"How is she?" the girl inquired.

"I have made her feel a little easier," he announced. "Now we will hear what Uncle Isaac has to say."

It was not a great deal.

"I put Will right to work, as you directed me, Jim," the visitor said to his brother. "Work is good for boys, and I started him at the bottom of the ladder. That's what you wanted; wasn't it?"

"Well, I did think so at the time, after he got into that scrape," said Mr. Ford. "I was pretty well provoked, but I begin to think now I was a bit too harsh with him."

"Nonsense!" snorted Uncle Isaac. "Harshness is good for boys. I wasn't any harsher on him than on any of the boys that work in my mill. I made him toe the mark—that's all."

"But Will has a sensitive nature," said his father slowly. "Did he give any intimation that he was going to leave?"

"Not a bit. He did his work well—that is, as well as any boys do. None of 'em are much good."

Grace caught her breath. She started to say something, but her father, by a slight motion of his head, stopped her.

"Will stayed at my home, you know," went on Uncle Isaac. "I did the best by him I knew. I didn't let him out nights, I made him read good and helpful books like Pilgrim's Progress, and others of the kind, and I kept him from the moving pictures.

"Well the first thing I knew he wasn't in his room when I went to call him one morning, and there was this note."

He held it out. Mr. Ford read it eagerly. All it said was:

"I can't stand it any longer. I'm going to quit."

"And he had packed up his things and left," went on Uncle Isaac. "I was dumbfounded, I was. I didn't think it was much use to hunt for him as I thought he'd come right home. He had some money—you know you gave him some."



Mr. Ford nodded.

“I didn’t write, as I calculated on coming up North,” went on Uncle Isaac. “Then when I telephoned, and found Will hadn’t come home, I didn’t know what to think.”

“Nor I either,” said Mr. Ford, “when you stopped in at my office and told me. When did he leave your house?”

“It will be a week to-morrow.”

“And never a word from him in all that time,” mused the father. “I don’t like it.”

Grace felt her eyes filling with tears. Betty patted her hand.

“Well, something will have to be done,” said Mr. Ford with a sigh. “Isaac, let’s talk this over, and see what we can do. I may have to go to Atlanta to straighten this out. I don’t believe Will would deliberately set out to cause us worry.”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t!” declared Grace, eagerly.

Her father and uncle left to go to Mr. Ford’s private office in the house, for he was a lawyer, and kept a large library at home. The girls sat in the main library, looking at one another with sad eyes.

“Oh, isn’t it too bad—just after we had such fun in our winter camp!” exclaimed Grace. “Poor Will! It does seem as if there was nothing happy in this world any more.”

“Oh, don’t feel that way!” protested Betty. “Come, have you girls no good news to cheer her up with?” she asked, looking at Mollie and Amy.

“I’m afraid I haven’t—unless it’s to tell the latest funny thing Dodo and Paul did,” spoke Mollie. “And I detest telling of children’s pranks.”

“How about you, Amy? Can’t you cheer up Grace?”

“Well, I did mean to tell you when I came in; but seeing Grace so upset I almost forgot it,” said Amy.

“Forgot what?” asked Betty with a smile. “Girls, I am almost sure it’s something good, Amy has such a quiet way with her that she always has unexpected pleasure for us.”

“I don’t know whether this will be pleasure or not,” went on Amy with a blush, “but Uncle Stonington (I’m going to call him that, though he is no relation)” she interjected, “Uncle Stonington has bought an orange grove in Florida, and we can have all the oranges we want. If that’s good news,” she finished.

“It is—fine!” declared Mollie.

“And we were talking about it to-day,” resumed the quiet girl, “and he said perhaps he would take Aunty down there to stay until spring, as her health is not very good. And I’ll probably go—”

“Oh, Amy!”



It was a protesting chorus.

“And I mentioned you girls, and Uncle Stonington said I could bring you down—if you’d come—all of you—to a Florida orange grove.”

“Amy Stonington—I mean Blackford—I’m just going to hug you!” cried Betty.
“Go! Of course we’ll go!”

“After we find Will,” put in Grace in a low voice.

