

## CHAPTER IV: 'COME HOME!'

Grace's announcement caused a flutter of excitement among her chums, and Mr. Ford's face showed his pleasure and surprise. But a moment later he had steeled his features into a non-committal mask, for he was really much provoked by his son's conduct, and if this was an appeal for forgiveness he wanted to be in the proper censuring attitude. At least so he reasoned.

"We'll see you again, Grace," spoke Betty, as she led the way for the other two girls to follow. She felt that the family might like to be by themselves while perusing the first letter from Will since his latest escapade.

"Oh, don't go!" exclaimed Grace, guessing her chums' intention. "Stay and hear what Will has to say. I'm sure papa would want you to," and she looked at Mr. Ford, who was nervously tearing open the envelope. His brother was watching him anxiously, but it was not a kindly look on Uncle Isaac's face.

At first, when it seemed as if something seriously might have happened to Will, the elderly man was rather alarmed, thinking perhaps he might be blamed. Now that a communication had come from the youth, seeming to indicate that all was well with him, his former employer was ready to deal harshly with him. He was even meditating what form of punishment could be applied, and he planned harder tasks for him, in case his father should send Will back to the cotton mill in Atlanta.

"Yes, stay, by all means," spoke the younger Mr. Ford, in rather absent-minded tones, as he flipped open the letter. "We have no secrets from you girls, and if you are going to Florida, and Will is in that neighborhood, he can take a run over and see you. Let's see now; what does the rascal say?"

There was a caressing note in the father's voice in spite of the somewhat stern look on his face, and he slowly read the letter, half aloud. The girls could catch a word here and there. Grace was leaning forward expectantly, her lips parted. The strain had told on her, and her eyes were still red from the tears she could not hold back.

"Dear Father and All," read Mr. Ford. "Hum—yes—I wonder if he's going to ask for money. 'I suppose this will surprise you'—yes, Will was always good on surprises."



“Oh, father, do please get on with the letter—tell us what has happened to Will!” begged Grace. “We’re so anxious! Mother will want to know. Read faster, please, if you can; won’t you, father?”

“All right, Grace. But nothing much seems to have happened to him so far. Hello, what’s this, though? ‘Going to strike out for myself. Can’t stand Uncle’—um—’will write particulars later—I have a good chance for an opening’—I wonder if it’s as a waiter in some Palm Beach hotel? ‘There may be a good thing in this. I can learn the business, the agent says’—”

“Oh, Daddy, please read it right!” importuned Grace. “We can’t tell what Will says and what you make up as you go along. Read it yourself, and tell us what it means. Then I’ll go to mamma.”

“Yes, and if he says anything against me, don’t be afraid to come out with it,” interjected Uncle Isaac. “Will and I didn’t get along well—that’s no secret. He didn’t like work, and he didn’t hesitate to say so. I’ve no doubt he had hard feelings against me, but I say here and now that I treated him as I would my own son. I made him work harder than I would my own son, in fact, for I felt that I had a duty to do by Will.”

“And I guess you did it—too well,” muttered Grace, with rather a vindictive look at her uncle, which look, however, he did not see.

“Well, to be frank with you, Isaac,” spoke Mr. Ford, “the boy says that he did not like the life in the factory. But I did not suppose he would. I did not send him there to like it, but I thought the discipline would do him good. However, he seems to have struck out for himself.”

“But, Daddy!” cried Grace, clinging to his arm. “What has happened? Where is Will? Where did he go?”

“There now,” he said, soothingly. “It seems to be all right, and Will is in no danger. All your tears were wasted. To be brief, he writes that he did not like the work in the mill, and getting a chance to go to Jacksonville, Florida, he took it and went without the formality of a good-bye.”

“What is he doing in Jacksonville?” asked Mollie. “If we go to Amy’s orange grove we may see him.”

“He writes that he has a chance to get in with a concern that is going to develop some of the Everglade lands,” went on Mr. Ford, referring to the letter. “The company plans to drain the swamps, and grow pecans, oranges and other tropical fruits and nuts.’ Will says he was offered a sort of secretaryship to one of the developers, and took it.

“He asks my permission to stay and ‘make good,’ as he calls it. He thinks it is a great chance; better even than the cotton business, Isaac.”



“Oh, yes, I s’pose so. There’s a lot of folks been fooled in those Everglade-developing concerns, though. They’re fakes, to my way of thinking. But let him live and learn. That’s the only way.”

“Are you going to let him stay down there?” asked Grace.

“Well, I don’t know,” said Mr. Ford, musingly. “I don’t bank much on Will’s knowledge of affairs. This company may be all right, and again it may not. I’d rather investigate a bit.”

“Will says,” he went on, again referring to the letter, “that he is sorry he went off in the abrupt way he did, but he felt that it was the only method to pursue. He says he feared you would stop him, if you heard about it, Isaac.”

“I’d have tried, anyhow,” was the grim comment.

“And as the opportunity had to be taken up quickly, or be lost, Will went away in a hurry,” continued his father. “He says he wants to show all of us that he can make his own way in the world, if given a chance, and he doesn’t want to come back until he has done so. He thinks he has had enough of school. He sends his love to—to all of us—and his mother, and says he will write again soon, and run up for a few days’ visit as soon as he can get the time.”

Mr. Ford’s voice faltered a little as he went on. After all, he loved Will very much, and he knew that it was only the spirit of a proud boy that was keeping him away from home.

“Are you going to let him stay, Daddy?” asked Grace again.

“No, Grace, I think I’ll write to him to come home,” replied Mr. Ford. “I think this has been a lesson to him. He gives his prospective Jacksonville address in this note. I’ll just send him a wire.”

Going to the telephone, Mr. Ford dictated this brief telegram to his son.

“Come home. All is forgiven.”

“It’s like one of those advertisements you see in the newspapers,” said Grace, with a little laugh.

She was much relieved now, and so were her chums. They could think with more pleasure of the prospective trip to Florida.

“But if Will left you a week ago, Uncle Isaac, I don’t see why this letter has only now arrived,” spoke Grace. “When is it postmarked, father?”

“It reached Deepdale to-day, but it was mailed in—let me see—why, I can’t make out the other mark, nor the date either.”

“Let me try,” suggested Uncle Isaac, putting on his glasses. But he had no better luck.



“Either Will carried that letter around in his pocket after writing it,” said Mr. Ford, “or he dropped it in some obscure postoffice where their cancelling stamps are worn out and letters go only once a week or so. The letter was written on the night he left your house, evidently,” he said to his brother, indicating the superscription. “I guess the mails down your way are not very certain, Isaac.”

“Not always. Well, I’m glad the boy is all right. I tried to do my duty by him, as I promised I would, Jim.”

“I know you did, Isaac, and I think this will be a lesson to him. I’ll be glad to have him back, though. For I—I’ve missed him,” and again Mr. Ford’s voice faltered.

“So have I,” said Grace, softly. “And this will make mamma’s headache better. I’m going up to tell her.”

“And we’ll be going, now that you have good news,” remarked Betty. “Wasn’t it odd to get good and bad news so close together?”

“But the good came last—and that makes it the best,” observed Amy with a smile.

Mr. Ford gave Grace her brother’s letter to take up to her mother, while he and his brother prepared to go down town again, to finish transacting some business that had called the Southerner up North.

“And I guess I’d better telegraph Will some money while I am at it,” his father said. “He writes that he has plenty of cash, but his idea of a lot of money is a few one dollar bills and a pocket full of change. I’ll wire twenty-five dollars to him in Jacksonville to come home with.”

“I’ll be down in a minute, girls,” called Grace, as she hurried up stairs to her mother’s room. “Wait for me, and we’ll talk about this Florida trip.”

When Grace came down, having made her mother happy with her good news, she was eating chocolates.

“Now we know she is all right,” laughed Betty.

