

THE OUTDOOR GIRLS IN FLORIDA

BY LAURA LEE HOPE

CHAPTER VII: OFF FOR FLORIDA

Grace was in tears when her father finished reading Will's pathetic letter. Nor were the eyes of her chums altogether dry, for they all liked Will, who seemed as much a brother to them as he did to his own sister.

"We—we mustn't let mamma know this," announced Grace, when she had regained control of herself. "It would prostrate her."

"Yes, we must keep it from her if we can," agreed Mr. Ford.

"To think of poor Will being in with—with criminals," went on his sister. "It will be a terrible experience for him."

"Perhaps they are not desperate criminals," suggested Amy, as a sort of ray of hope.

"No, I do not believe they are," said Mr. Ford, frankly. "The State would not let contractors hire them if they were. I suppose they are mostly young men who have been guilty of slight violations of the law, and hard work is the best punishment for them. But I certainly am sorry for Will.

"I had no idea that when, to punish him for what was more thoughtlessness than anything else, I sent him South, it would turn out this way. I regret it very much."

"But it wasn't your fault, Daddy," declared Grace. "It just couldn't be helped. But Will is brave—his letter shows that. Oh, can you help him?"

"I certainly shall, daughter," and Mr. Ford put his hand on Grace's head, now bowed in grief. "I will write to Uncle Isaac at once, and have him get in touch with the authorities. They should be able to tell where the different gangs of prisoners have been sent, and by investigating each one we can, by elimination, find Will. Then it will be an easy matter to get him home. And I think he will be very glad to see Deepdale again, in spite of the fact that he wanted to start out for himself to 'make good.' I hope the lesson will not be too hard for him."

"If we could only do something!" exclaimed Betty.

"Yes, girls always seem so—so helpless at a time like this," murmured Mollie. "Oh, I wish I were a—man!"

“Tut—tut!” exclaimed Mr. Ford, with a laugh, something he had seldom indulged in of late. “We couldn’t get along without our girls. You can offer sympathy, if nothing else, and often that is something as real as actual service. But I don’t agree that you girls are helpless. You have proved in the past that you outdoor lassies can do things, and I would not be surprised in the future if you gave further evidence of it.”

Though he spoke rather lightly, Mr. Ford little realized how soon the time was to come when the outdoor girls were to prove their sterling worth in a peculiar manner.

“Well, things are certainly taking a queer turn,” said Grace as she looked at the scribbled letter of her brother, so strangely forwarded to them. “There is no telling how long ago this was written. Poor Will is probably having a hard time this very minute.”

“He probably is if he’s at work in a turpentine camp,” said Mr. Ford. “It is no easy work, and it is no wonder the contractors have to take criminals, and fairly kidnap their helpers. Then they have to literally mount guard over them to force them to remain. But I must start things moving to aid Will.”

Letters were written to Uncle Isaac, to the planter who had so kindly forwarded the letter, and to various authorities.

“But you girls must not let this interfere with your trip, nor with the enjoyment of it,” said Mr. Ford, who had told his wife something of the truth, but not enough to cause her to worry. He said they had word from Will, and hoped soon to have him home. And Mrs. Ford, who leaned much on her husband and daughter, was more content than she had been. “Get ready, Grace,” said her father, “and enjoy your winter in the South.”

“I certainly don’t enjoy a winter in the North,” she replied. “Girls, did you see my chocolates?”

“Hopeless! Hopeless!” murmured Mollie, with a smile, as she found the confections on the mantel.

Preparations for the Florida trip went on apace. The girls were so busy sorting out what clothes they were going to take, and having new gowns made that, for a time, they almost forgot about Will.

Though Mr. Ford had set in motion various forces, no definite word had yet been received. But they were hoping that every day would bring some message. Uncle Isaac wrote that he was doing all he could.

Frank Haley, Will’s school chum, and Allen Washburn, the young lawyer, were very anxious to start off and make a search for their friend. But Mr. Ford, though deeply grateful to them, thought it might complicate matters. So, much against their desire, the two young men were forced to remain in Deepdale.



“Though we may take a run down and see you,” said Allen to Betty a few days before the one set for the departure. “Would you mind?”

“We shall be very glad to see you,” she answered, rather non-committally.

“We?” he asked, pointedly.

“Oh, of course I meant that I would, too,” and she blushed as she glanced at him.

“That’s better!” he laughed.

The next day Mollie telephoned for all of her chums to gather at her house for a sort of farewell tea some of the friends of the girls wished to tender to them. It was a cold, snowy, blustery day, and as Grace, wrapped in her furs, walked shiveringly along with Amy and Betty she remarked:

“I can almost envy Will now—down where it is nice and warm.”

“Oh, we’ll soon be there,” answered Betty.

They found Mollie in the midst of showing some of her new gowns to her friends, and the three chums joined in the admiration. For Mollie, with the characteristics of a French girl, loved pretty clothes, and rather inclined to a pronounced style not indulged in by her chums. But she always dressed becomingly.

“It is lovely!” exclaimed Hattie Reynolds. “But isn’t it awfully light, Mollie?”

“Not for where we are going,” was the answer. “You forget that we are going to a summer land. Oh, Dodo—stop that!” she cried, for from the room where stood Mollie’s half-packed trunk came the twin, trailing a garment. “That’s my best petticoat!” wailed Mollie. “You’ll ruin it. And Paul! What are you doing with that shirtwaist—it’s my very finest lawn!”

“Us ‘ookin’ for tandy!” calmly announced Dodo. “Has oo dot any in oo pockets?”

“Pockets! We never have pockets!” cried Betty. “Oh, aren’t they too funny for anything!”

“You wouldn’t say so, if they did this—or something like it—to you three or four times a day,” exclaimed Mollie, half-crossly, as she advanced to rescue her garments. But the twins backed away, stepping on the skirt.

“Paul—Dodo—give those to sister at once!” commanded Mollie.

“Us will—for tandy!” stipulated Paul, craftily.

“Oh, if I only had some!” exclaimed Mollie.

“Allow me,” volunteered Grace, producing a bag. “Here, children.”

“Not while they have my things!” cried Mollie. “Chocolate on my white waist—never! Put the things down. Paul—Dodo, and Grace will give you candy.”

“Oo dot tandy?” asked Dodo, looking doubtfully at Grace.



“Yes,” and she opened the bag to show them. This was evidence enough, and the garments were placed where they belonged, Mollie hastening in to lay them straight again.

The little tea was a success, in spite of the invasion of the twins. The girls were bidden farewell by their friends—rather envious friends, to be frank—for who would not envy one a trip to sunny Florida with its flowers in the midst of winter?

The motor boat had been crated and shipped. Mr. Stonington had arranged his business for a long stay in the South, and all was in readiness for the trip. The girls had decided on a hundred and one things to take with them, and had rejected as many, only to make new selections. But finally even their exacting tastes were gratified, and satisfied, and their trunks were ready to go.

“But oh, I do wish Aunty Stonington was better,” sighed Amy, the day before that set for their departure.

“Why, is she worse?” asked Betty.

“She seems very weak. Uncle is quite worried about her, though the doctor says the change will benefit her as soon as we get there. But I am afraid about the trip, though we are to go in a compartment car, and won’t have to change.”

“That will be lovely,” said Grace. “We’ll look after your aunt for you, Amy.”

“That’s sweet of you girls. Perhaps it will not be as bad as I fear. But she seems failing rapidly. The winter has been unusually severe for her.”

“And poor mamma is not herself,” murmured Grace. “Lack of news from Will seems to prey on her mind. But there! don’t let’s talk any more about our troubles. Let’s look on the bright side of the clouds. I’m sure we ought to just hug Amy to pieces for giving us this nice trip.”

“Well, please leave enough pieces of me so I can eat an orange or two when we get to Florida,” laughed Amy.

“Also enough to catch a few alligators,” added Betty.

“Don’t you mention the horrid things!” cried Grace with a nervous shiver. “Are there really any there, Amy? Say no, my dear, and I’ll give you two chocolates.”

“Well, there are some,” said Amy, who never could seem to dissimulate. “But Uncle Stonington says they are small—at least, near where we are going. Some people have them for pets.”

“Mercy!” cried Grace. “I’d as soon have a pet snake.”

“Well, we won’t worry about them until we get bitten,” suggested Mollie. “And perhaps their bark is worse than their bite. Do they bark, Amy?”

“I’m sure I don’t know.”



“No, they cry—like babies,” said Grace. “Don’t you remember ‘alligator tears?’”

“She’s thinking of crocodiles,” said Betty. “Or else alligator pears.”

“Worse and worse,” protested Mollie. “We’ll have the fauna and flora of Florida hopelessly mixed before we get through. Now let’s see if we have everything packed,” and they went over their list of belongings for the tenth time.

But all things must have an end, and so did their preparations. The day of the start came, final good-byes were said, and with Mr. and Mrs. Stonington the four outdoor girls took the train for the Sunny South.

