

# THE OUTDOOR GIRLS IN FLORIDA

BY LAURA LEE HOPE

## CHAPTER X: DOUBTFUL HELP

Betty's words caused her three chums to stare at her in wonder. Then, by glancing over the side of the boat themselves, they confirmed what she had said.

"A—a sand bar," faltered Grace, sinking back among some cushions that matched her dress wonderfully well. Mollie said later that Grace always tried to match something, even if it was only her chocolates.

"A plain, ordinary sand bar," repeated Betty. "One of the men at the dock warned me about them, and even told me how to locate them, by the peculiar ripple of the shallow water over them. But I forgot all about it. Oh dear!"

"Well, it can't be so very bad," spoke Mollie, who was idly splashing the water with one hand. "We can't sink, that's a consolation."

"Don't do that!" exclaimed Amy quickly. She had "cuddled" closer to Betty following the shock as the boat came to a stop on the concealed bar.

"Don't do what?" asked Mollie wonderingly.

"Put your hand in the water. There may be alligators, you know. I think—I'm not sure—but I think I saw something like the head of one a moment ago."

Mollie pulled in her hand so suddenly that she flung a little shower of drops on all in the boat.

"Stop it! You mean thing!" cried Grace.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," spoke Mollie with elaborate politeness. "I didn't think your sailor suit would spot—mine doesn't."

"It isn't that—no indeed. I meant Amy—for bringing up such a topic as alligators at this moment, when we can't move. And the ugly creatures always come out on a sand bar to sun themselves; don't they?"

"Not on this sand bar," asserted Betty. "It's under water. If it had been out I should have seen it."

"I'm sure I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable, Grace," said Amy humbly, "but really I did not think it was safe for Mollie to put her hand in the water."

"Of course it wasn't, you dear!" soothed Mollie, patting Amy softly on the shoulder. "I wasn't thinking of what I was doing."

"And I didn't mean anything, either," added Grace, thinking that perhaps she and Mollie had not treated Amy with just the deference due a hostess, for Amy did figure in that role.

"Oh, that's all right," said Amy with a smile that seemed always full of warm fellowship and feeling. "I know just how you feel."

"Well, I feel wretched—there's no denying that," spoke Betty with a sigh. "To think that I should run you girls on a sand bar, almost on our first trip. Isn't it horrid?"

"Well, we'll forgive her if she'll run us off again; won't we, girls?" asked Grace, searching among the cushions.

"Here it is," said Amy with another of her calm smiles, as she produced the box of candy for which Grace was evidently searching.

"Thanks. Well, Betty, are you going to get forgiven?"

"Which means am I going to get you off this bar? Well, I'm going to do my best. Wait until I take a look at the engine."

"What's the matter with it?" asked Mollie quickly, a new cause for alarm dawning in her mind.

"Nothing, I hope," replied Betty. "But we ran on the bar so suddenly that it may be strained from its base."

"Is it a baseball engine?" asked Grace languidly. She seemed to have recovered her composure now. Whether it was the fact of her chocolates being safe, or that there was no immediate danger of sinking, or that no alligators were in sight, was not made manifest, but she certainly seemed all right again.

"It's enough of a ball game to have a base, and to be obliged to hold it," said Betty with a smile, as she bent over the machinery, testing the bolts and nuts that held the motor to the bottom of the boat.

"I guess it's all right," she added with a sigh of relief. "Now to see if it will operate. But first I think we'd better see if we can push ourselves off with the oars and boat hook," for Betty, knowing that the best of motors may not "mote" at times, carried a pair of long sweeps by which the Gem could laboriously be propelled in case of a break-down. There was also a long hooked pole, for landing purposes.

"Mollie, you take one of the oars, and I'll use the other," directed Betty, for she realized that she and the French girl were stronger than the others. "We'll let Grace and Amy use the hook. Then if we all push together we may get off without further trouble."



If that won't answer, we'll try reversing the engine." The machinery had been shut down by Betty immediately following the sudden stop on the bar.

About the stranded craft swirled the muddy river. Bits of driftwood—logs and sticks—floated down, and sometimes there was seen what looked to be the long, knobby nose of an alligator, but the girls were not sure enough of this, and, truth to tell, they much preferred to think of the objects as black logs, or bits of wood. It was much more comforting.

"Are you all ready?" asked the Little Captain as she took her place on one side, well up in the bow, Mollie taking a similar position on the other side. Each held one of the long oars.

"All ready," answered Amy, who had taken up the boat hook.

"Wait a minute," begged Grace, looking for something on which to cleanse her hands of the brown smudge of chocolate. "This candy is so sticky!"

"There's the whole river to wash in," said Mollie. "'Water, water everywhere,' and not any solid enough to go ashore on," she concluded with a laugh.

"I'll never dip my hands in this water—not until I can see bottom," declared Grace, finally selecting a bit of rag that Betty used to polish the brass work of the engine.

"As if it would hurt to take hold of the boat hook with chocolate fingers," spoke Mollie a bit sharply. "At any rate one could wash the pole without fear if its being nipped by an alligator."

"Don't be silly," directed Grace with flashing eyes.

"Well, don't eat so much candy then."

"Come, girls, if we're going to get off the bar it's time we tried it," suggested Betty with a smile. She did not want the two tempers, that seemed often on the verge of striking fire, one from the other, to kindle now. There was enough of other trouble, she reasoned.

The oars and pole were thrust into the water ahead of the boat. Bottom was found within a few inches, showing how shallow was the stream over the bar. The prow of the Gem seemed to have buried itself deeply in it.

They pushed and pushed and pushed again, but the only noticeable effect was the bending of the slender pole of the boathook on which Grace and Amy were shoving with all their strength. The motor boat did not budge.

"Once more!" cried Betty. "I think it moved a little."

"I wish—I could—think so!" panted Mollie, as she shifted the position of her oar.

Again they all bent to the task, and Amy and Grace combining their strength on the pole caused it to bend more than ever.



“Stop!” cried Betty, in some alarm. “It will break, and I don’t know where I can get another. We’d better try reversing the engine.”

She sat down in the cushioned cockpit, an example followed by the others. They were breathing rather hard, and presently Betty went into the cabin and came out with some iced orangeade that had been put aboard in a vacuum bottle to retain its coolness.

“Here,” she invited, “let’s refresh ourselves a bit. I can see that we are going to have trouble.”

“Trouble?” queried Amy, looking at her chums.

“Yes. We aren’t going to get off as easily as I thought.”

“Do you think we’ll ever get off?” asked Grace.

“Of course we will,” declared Betty promptly.

“I’ll never wade or swim ashore—not with the river full of such nasty alligators!” announced Grace.

“Wait until you’re asked,” cried Mollie. “I’m sure we can get off when the motor is reversed.”

“The propeller seems to be in deep water,” spoke Betty, taking an observation over the stern. “Come back here, girls, and sit down.”

“It’s more comfortable here,” objected Grace, languidly. “In fact, if it were not for the fact of being stranded I should like it here.” The cockpit was covered by an awning which kept off the hot rays of the sun, and the cushions, as Grace said, were very comfortable.

“But I want to get all the weight possible in the stern,” Betty insisted. “That will raise the bow.”

Understanding what was required of them, the girls moved aft, and perched on the flat, broad deck, while Betty went to start the motor and slip in the reverse clutch.

The engine seemed a bit averse to starting at first, and, for a few seconds, Betty feared that it had suffered some damage. But suddenly it began to hum and throb, gaining in momentum quickly, as it was running free. Betty slowed it down at the throttle, and then, looking aft to see that all was clear, she slipped in the clutch that reversed the propeller.

There was a smother of foam under the stern of the Gem, which trembled and throbbed with the vibration. Betty turned on more power, until finally the maximum, under the circumstances, was reached.

“Are we moving?” she called, anxiously, to her chums.

“Not an inch!” answered Mollie, leaning over to look at the surface of the water. “Not an inch.”



"We'll try it a little longer," said Betty. "Sometimes it takes a little while to pull loose from the sand."

"Suppose some of us go up in the bow and push?" suggested Mollie. "That may help some."

"Perhaps; and yet I want to keep the bow as light as possible, so it won't settle down any more in the sand."

"I'll go," volunteered Mollie. "One can't make much difference. And I am not so very heavy."

"All right," agreed Betty.

With one of the oars Mollie pushed hard down into the holding sand, while Betty kept the motor going at full speed, reversed.

But the Gem seemed too fond of her new location to quit it speedily, and the girls, looking anxiously over the side, could see no change in their position.

"It doesn't seem to do any good," wailed Betty, hopelessly, as she slowed down the engine. The water about the craft was very muddy and thick now, caused by the propeller stirring up the bottom of the river.

"I guess we'll have to wade, or swim, ashore," said Amy, in what she meant to be a cheerful voice.

"Never!" cried Grace. "I'll stay here until someone comes for us. Say, we haven't called for help!" she exclaimed, with sudden thought. "We're not so far from either shore but what we could make ourselves heard, I think. Let's give a good call!"

"That's so," agreed Mollie. "I never thought of that."

The girls looked across to the distant shores. True enough, the banks were not far off—too far to wade or swim, perhaps, but as the day was calm and still their voices might possibly carry.

"There doesn't seem to be much of a population on either side," observed Betty, grimly. "Still there may be houses back from the shore, hidden by the trees. Now, all together."

They raised their fresh young voices in a combined call that certainly must have carried to both shores. Then they waited, but nothing happened. Again they called, and again—several times.

"I'll give the first man who comes for us in a boat all the chocolates I have left," bribed Grace. No one appeared to accept.

Again they called, after a little rest, and a sipping of what remained of the orangeade. But to no purpose did their appeals for aid float across across the stretch of muddy water.



Once more Betty tried reversing the engine, and again the girls pushed with the oars and pole. The Gem remained fast on the sandy bar.

“I wonder how it would do if I got out and dug around the bow?” suggested Betty. “The water is shallow on the bar—hardly over my ankles.”

“Don’t you do it!” cried Grace. “Those horrid—”

“Hark!” cried Mollie, with upraised hand, “I hear something.”

Through the stillness they could all note the regular staccato puffing of the exhaust of a gasoline motor. It drew nearer.

“It’s a boat coming!” cried Betty.

A moment later a motor craft swung into view around an upper bend, coming swiftly down the river. But at the sight of it the girls gave a gasp, for it was filled with roughly dressed colored men, while in the stern sat a white man of even more villainous appearance than the blacks. And the boat was headed straight for the stranded Gem. Help was coming indeed, but it was of doubtful quality.

