

THE OUTDOOR GIRLS IN FLORIDA

BY LAURA LEE HOPE

CHAPTER XII: A WARNING

Trailing vines hung from great trees on either side of the path. Large bunches of Spanish moss festooned other monarchs of the forest, which seemed gloomy indeed as the girls gazed off into it. Now and then some creature of the woods, disturbed by the passage of the party, would take flight and scurry off, fly away or slink deeper into the fastness, according to its nature.

"Ugh!" exclaimed Grace in a low voice, as she walked along behind Betty, "I don't like it here!"

"Why not?" asked Mollie, who was in the rear of Grace. "I think it is most romantic. Just think—we may be treading over the very ground where de Leon and his men searched for that fountain of perpetual youth."

"What was that?" asked Mr. Hammond, turning about interestedly.

"Oh, one of the old discoverers was searching for a fountain to keep him young," explained Betty, with a smile.

"Huh! He'd better be careful of what he drinks in these woods," said the overseer. "There's water that's deadly poison, to say nothing of the moccasins and copperheads in some of the swamps. If that fellow is a friend of yours warn him to be careful."

"Oh, he died some years ago," explained Mollie, trying not to laugh.

"Oh, well, then that's all right," and the overseer seemed relieved. "Yes, you want to be careful of what you drink in these wilds. Of course a good clear spring is all right, and generally you'll find a cocoanut shell, or something like that, near it to drink from. That's a sign it's good water."

"What are those other things?" asked Amy. "Cottontails—did you call them—do you mean rabbits?"

"No, indeed. I mean snakes."

"Oh!" screamed the girls in chorus.

"They call 'em cotton mouths because their lips are white," Mr. Hammond explained, "and it looks as though they were chewing cotton. They're deadly too, and so are the copperheads, which look just like that color. Be careful of 'em."

"I—I don't believe I want to go any farther," faltered Grace, hanging back.

"Oh, there's none along this trail!" the overseer hastened to assure her. "It's only where there's not much travel. Just keep a sharp lookout—that's all."

They went on in Indian file, for the path was narrow. As they penetrated deeper into the interior the woods became more and more gloomy until even brave Betty began to feel a bit doubtful as to the wisdom of coming. But she knew Mr. Hammond could be trusted to see that no harm came to them.

The path widened now and they came to a little clearing. On one edge of it stood a hut before which was an old man—so old in fact that to the outdoor girls he seemed like a wizened monkey.

"Mercy! Who's that?" whispered Mollie.

"An Indian," answered Mr. Hammond.

"An Indian?" queried Betty.

"Yes, one of the Seminoles. He's all right, and a friend of mine. Hello, Ko-dah!" called Mr. Hammond, adding something in a sort of jargon, to which the aged man replied. He seemed more like a negro than an Indian.

"He claims to be over a hundred years old," went on Mr. Hammond, as he and the party passed through the clearing. "And he sure looks it. His wife is nearly as old."

As they went on they heard ahead of them the not unpleasant strains of a negro melody.

"What's that?" asked Grace, coming to a stop.

"We're near Belton's place," explained the foreman. "He keeps quite a lot of hands in readiness, and they pass away the time singing and eating until they're hired. I hope he has some good ones for us. The oranges need picking quickly now."

A minute later the party emerged into a large clearing about which were grouped many huts, in front of which, and lolling in the shade of some, were a score or more of colored men. They set up a call for "Boss," as Mr. Hammond came in sight.

"Howdy, Hammond!" greeted the labor contractor, as he came out of the best-looking house in the clearing. "Why, it's the girls I hauled off the sand bar!" he added, as he recognized Betty and her chums. "Did you get home all right?"

"Yes, and we've come to do as you said, and hire some help for Mr. Stonington," ventured Betty, blushing a bit at her boldness.

"Good!" exclaimed Mr. Belton. "I've got just the kind of pickers you want, Hammond. Quick, cheerful lot of boys, that will work from sunrise to sunset."



“That’s what you always say,” laughed Mr. Hammond. “I guess they won’t be much worse than the usual run. Now let’s talk business,” and the two men walked off to one side.

“Oh, I forgot,” called the contractor. “Young ladies, my wife is up in that cabin,” and he pointed to the one he had just left. “She’ll be glad to see you and make you a cup of tea. Sue!” he called, “take care of Mr. Stonington’s girls!” and a woman appearing in the doorway waved a friendly greeting to the chums.

Over the teacups, in a cleaner and neater cabin than one would suspect it to be from a glance at the outside, the girls told of their trip. Mrs. Belton said her husband had told her of their predicament on the sand bar.

“How do you like it in Florida?” she asked, after a pause.

“I’d like it better if I could find my brother,” said Grace. “He’s here—lost—in some turpentine swamp, we are afraid. I wonder if Mr. Belton could give us any information, since he is in the labor contracting business?”

“You can ask him when he comes back,” said his wife.

“And if we can get any trace of Will we’ll go there and get him out of the clutches of those men,” went on Grace.

Mrs. Belton started from her chair.

“Don’t you do it, honey! Don’t you do it!” she exclaimed earnestly. “Keep away from the turpentine camps whatever you do. There’s a desperate lot of men there—convicts a lot of ‘em, and there’s worse men guarding ‘em. Keep away if you know what is good for you,” and she looked earnestly at Grace, who paled as she thought of poor Will.

