

THE OUTDOOR GIRLS IN FLORIDA

BY LAURA LEE HOPE

CHAPTER XIII: A STRANGE TOW

Betty, as well as Grace, Mollie and Amy, seemed much taken aback by the earnest words of Mrs. Belton. The wife of the labor contractor seemed under stress of some excitement, as she faced the girls after the warning.

“Don’t go!” she went on. “Don’t any of you think of going! I used to think my husband dealt with a rough enough class of men, but those in the interior—in the turpentine camps, and cypress swamps—oh, they are the most lawless element you can imagine. And no wonder, for no men, unless they are compelled, will work with those contractors. They have to keep their men just like prisoners.”

“Oh, dear, don’t tell me any more!” begged Grace, her eyes filling with tears as she thought of her brother.

“But perhaps Will isn’t treated as the others are,” suggested Betty, giving the woman a look she understood. “He went there under different circumstances than the others, and he may receive consideration.”

“Of course I don’t know all the circumstances,” went on Mrs. Belton as she nodded at Betty to show that she would be more careful in what she said. “He may be favored. Of course not all the contractors are cruel, but they have to deal with a bad class of men, and that makes them harsh, perhaps. But take my advice, and don’t go near one of those places under any circumstances. Please don’t!”

“Don’t go where?” asked her husband, coming in at that moment with Mr. Hammond. “Are the girls thinking of going cruising among the Everglades?” and he laughed heartily. Betty was beginning to like him very much, as were the other girls. He was rough, and uncouth, but he seemed honest and sincere, and his wife, a hard-working woman, had given of her best hospitality to the visitors.

“No, they weren’t talking of the Everglades,” said Mrs. Belton. “This young lady thinks her brother may have been taken to one of the turpentine camps, or other camps in the interior, and she wants to rescue him. I was telling her to keep away.”



“And that’s good advice,” agreed Mr. Belton, more seriously than he had yet spoken. “I don’t mind mixing up with some men, but those contract laborers are pretty bad. My men are nothing to them, though I do get a hard customer once in a while.”

“But what can we do?” Grace besought. “If Will is there we must get him away! Of course I’m not sure, but papa is looking everywhere for him, and the best clue we got was that he was somewhere in the interior of here.”

“Then take my advice, and let the authorities do the searching,” said Mr. Belton. “The season won’t last much longer, and they may discharge a lot of their men—these contractors may. Then your brother could come out of his own accord.”

“Oh, but it is so long to wait!” cried Grace. “Surely there must be some way,” and she looked pleadingly at the two men.

“Well, I don’t know,” said Mr. Belton slowly. “I’ll do all I can to help you, and so will any of my men. And I think Hammond, here, will say the same thing.”

“Surely!” exclaimed the overseer. “But the question is—what could we do?”

“We’d first have to locate the camp,” said the labor man. “After that we could talk business. It would depend on who was running it, and where it was. I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ll keep my eyes and ears open, and when I hear anything I’ll let you know, Miss. What sort of a looking young man might your brother be?”

Grace described Will accurately, enough so that Mr. Belton said he would know him if he saw or heard of him.

“And now are you young ladies ready to go back?” asked Mr. Hammond, as he smiled at Betty and her chums.

“Quite,” she answered. “We have had a good view of the interior of Florida.”

“Oh, shucks!” exclaimed the labor contractor. “Begging your pardon, Miss, for that kind of talk. But you haven’t seen anything of the interior yet. There’s parts I wouldn’t want to trust myself to, not with all of my men behind me, and I’m not a scary sort of an individual, either. There’s parts no one has ever been in, I reckon. Don’t you say so, Hammond?”

“That’s what I do!” was the emphatic answer. “Well, are you ready, girls?”

They left, bidding Mr. and Mrs. Belton good-bye, and Grace received renewed promises that all possible would be done to locate her brother.

Mr. Belton promised to bring a boat-load of laborers to the orange grove in the morning, and as the visitors left they heard the soft strains of one of the negro songs following them through the deep woods. The effect was weird in the extreme, especially when they reached the denser parts of the forest.



Good time was made back to “Orangeade,” as the girls had christened the bungalow in the grove, the boat running well. Mr. Hammond complimented the girls on the manner in which they ran the craft, each taking a turn at steering, while the overseer imparted instructions as to various sand bars and shallow places along the course.

Mr. Stonington was much interested in the report brought back by the girls regarding the lawlessness of the interior camps, and he agreed with Mr. Hammond that if any attempt at a rescue should be made a number of reliable men must be taken along.

“And I must write to father!” exclaimed Grace, “and ask if he has any clues. He may be able to give us some aid in locating the neighborhood of the camp. Oh, if Will could only know we are here, and would send us a letter! Just think, girls! He doesn’t even know we are in Florida!”

“It does seem strange,” remarked Mollie. “Usually wherever we go we see the boys once in a while.”

“It is lonesome without them,” said Betty impulsively. “I wonder if there is any chance of them coming down this summer?”

“It’s winter—up where they are,” remarked Amy.

“Oh, every place is summer to Betty when she thinks of a certain young man; summer and orange blossoms,” drawled Grace.

“Don’t be silly!” snapped Betty, with a vivid blush. “You know I meant all the boys—not one!”

“Selfish girl—she wants them all!” laughed Mollie.

Glorious were they—those winter days in Florida, where the outdoor girls enjoyed themselves to the utmost. Had it not been for one little rift in the lute, their pleasure and happiness would have been complete—and that rift was the absence of Will. Grace seemed to feel it more keenly as day passed day and no word came.

Her father did write saying that the inquiry was progressing slowly, and that it would take some time to have scanned each list of minor offenders who had been “hired” out to contractors under an old law, operative only in certain cases. As for naming any special locality where Will might be, that was impossible, as yet.

Mrs. Stonington seemed very much improved by her stay in the South, but she was not yet out of danger, the doctor said, and must use care. Her husband and Amy were still anxious about her, and watched her carefully; for, though she was no relation to Amy, she still acted, and in reality was, almost as a mother to the girl.

Amy’s newly-found brother paid one visit to the bungalow in the orange grove, but could not stay long, as his business was increasing. He reported all well in Deepdale.



“By the way,” he said with a chuckle, “those old friends of yours, Alice Jallow and Kittie Rossmore, have started a sort of automobile club. I guess they’re trying to rival you.”

“They’re not friends of ours,” said Mollie quickly, “and as for being rivals—we refuse to consider them as such.”

“Well, I don’t blame you.”

The orange picking was in full swing now, and the girls spent many happy days in the grove. They learned many new ways of eating oranges, and marveled at the difference in flavor of the fruit picked from the trees, from that as they recalled it in the North.

The laborers supplied by Mr. Belton had proved to be good workers, and more were sent for, the girls taking Mr. Hammond up to the clearing in the motor boat to arrange about them. Grace hoped to have some news of her brother, but the contractor said he had not been able to get any clues.

It was about a week after this, on a fine sunny day, not as warm as some of its predecessors, that Betty proposed a trip in her motor boat.

“Let’s go quite a distance up the river,” she suggested. “There are new sights to see, Mr. Hammond says, and no bars to run upon after we pass the landing where Mr. Belton docks. We may find some new streams or lakes to explore, for we’ve been all over Lake Chad.” This was so, the girls soon having exhausted the possibilities of that body of water.

“I’m willing,” agreed Mollie.

“And we can take our lunch, and stay all day,” added Grace. “Oh dear! I wish someone would invent non-melting chocolate!” she complained, for her fingers were stained with the half-liquid confection.

“Some non-eating ones would be better,” said Mollie, with a laugh. “Just the kind you look at, you know.”

“I don’t think that’s funny,” spoke Grace, slightly elevating her pretty nose.

Finally they got started, after repeated injunctions from Mrs. Stonington to “be careful,” to all of which they dutifully promised obedience.

The trip was a delightful one, and no accidents marred it. They swept on up the river, which had hardly current enough to be noticeable. They paused to admire pretty spots, and stopped for lunch in a “perfect fairyland of a grove,” to quote Amy. The Gem was anchored near an overhanging tree which served to permit the girls to go ashore dry-shod.



Merry indeed was the luncheon. Grace was passing the olives, when she happened to glance toward the boat. Her surprise caused her to drop the bottle in the box of crackers, as she cried:

“Betty—look, your boat is adrift!”

“So it is!” agreed the Little Captain, standing up. “I thought we anchored it securely.”

“And look!” added Mollie, as she pointed. “It’s going up stream! Can the engine have started of itself?”

“No, the clutch is out,” said Betty, running down to the shore. “Something is towing the boat up stream. See, the anchor rope is extended out in front!”

