

THE OUTDOOR GIRLS IN FLORIDA

BY LAURA LEE HOPE

CHAPTER XX: THE LOON

Onward chugged the Gem and the sudden acceleration in the heart-beats of the girls seemed to keep time with the staccato exhaust of the motor.

“Lost!” faltered Grace.

“And night coming on,” echoed Amy.

“Oh, you two!” cried Mollie. “I wish I were a boy!”

“Why?” asked Betty, as she guided her craft to the center of the stream. It was lighter there, for they were not so much under the overhanging trees with their festoons of moss. “Why, Mollie, dear?”

“Then I could use slang, such as—oh, well, what’s the use? I don’t suppose it would do any good.”

“But are you sure we are lost?” asked Amy. “What makes you say so, Betty?”

“Because this place doesn’t look at all like any part of the river we came down before. The trouble was that we let Tom steer, and we didn’t notice the course very much, as we should have done on coming in a new channel. But I’m sure we are lost.”

“It isn’t a very pleasant thing to be sure about,” said Mollie grimly, “but we may as well face the worst. Grace, let’s you and I look to our stock of provisions.”

“What for?” asked Grace, who had found a few stray pieces of candy in a box, and was contentedly eating them.

“Well, if we’re lost that doesn’t mean we’re not going to eat, and if we have enough for supper and breakfast—”

“Breakfast!” cried Grace. “Are we going to be here for breakfast?”

“And stay out all night?” added Amy.

“There may be no help for it,” said Betty as calmly as she could. “We have slept aboard before this, and we can do it again.”

“But you’re not going to give up without trying to get back to the grove; are you?” asked Mollie, who, after the first shock, was her own brave self again, as was Betty.

“Of course I’m going to try,” replied Betty. “But that doesn’t mean we’ll get there. Often, after you’re lost, trying to find your way back again only makes you lost the more—especially with night coming on.”

“But what are we going to do?” queried Grace blankly. She had ceased eating candy now.

“Well, it’s very evident that we’re not going the right way,” went on Betty. “The farther we go the more sure I am that we were never on this part of the stream before. So I think we had better turn back, and, if necessary, start over again from where we had lunch.

“We may be able to see the right turn by starting over once more. Then we will be all right. Once I am started on the right track I think I can follow it. We have a compass, and I noticed, in a general way, which direction we came, though I was not as careful as I should have been.”

“But it will be very dark,” objected Amy. “It is getting darker all the while.”

“That will be the worst of it,” admitted Betty frankly, “and if we find we can’t go on, we shall have to tie up for the night. We might do worse.”

“But anchor far enough from shore so that nothing can—get us,” pleaded Grace. “No alligators, I mean.”

“Don’t worry—they won’t come aboard,” declared Betty.

“These rivers are split up into a lot of side brooks, bayous and such things,” said Mollie. “Tom mentioned that, and he said that often one could wander about in them being close to the right route all the while, and yet not know a thing about it.”

“Cheerful prospect,” remarked Grace.

“Oh, I’m sure we’ll get on the right stream—sometime,” spoke Mollie cheerfully. “What do you say—had we not better turn back?”

They all agreed that this was best, and soon, in the fast gathering dusk, the Gem was swung about and was breasting the rather sluggish current.

To the credit of the outdoor girls be it said that even in this nerve-racking emergency they did not altogether lose heart and courage. Of course there was that first instinctive fear, and something like a gasping for breath, as when one plunges into cold water. But the reaction came, and the girls were themselves once more—brave and self-reliant.

“I only hope we don’t pass the stream up which we went to have our lunch,” spoke Mollie as they went on. She and the others were peering from side to side in the gloom.

“Oh, I’m sure we can find that,” declared Betty. “There is a big, dead cypress tree, with a lot of moss on it, just at the turn. We must watch for that.”



There were one or two false alarms before they saw it, but finally they were all sure of the turn, and Betty made it.

“Oh, are you going all the way back to where we ate?” asked Grace, as Betty guided her craft into the branch stream.

“I think so,” answered the Little Captain. “It will not take much longer, and we may find Tom there. If we do, all our troubles will be over. I think we had better go up.”

“But it’s getting dark so fast,” objected Grace.

“Then a little more dark won’t make much difference,” returned Mollie with a shrug. “Go on, Betty.”

The Gem chugged her way up “Alligator Brook,” as the girls had named it. Eagerly they looked for some sign of their missing escort, and listened for any sound that would indicate he was coming to meet them. But the forest was silent. Night was settling down, and birds and beasts were seeking their resting places.

They reached the place where the boat had been tied, and could see where they had eaten their lunch. Over in the gloom there fluttered the paper Betty had fastened to a tree to indicate to Tom the fact that his charges had left.

“He hasn’t been here,” said Mollie in a low voice.

“No, there’s the packet of lunch,” went on Grace pointing to it. “We may need it ourselves.”

Betty said nothing, but in the semi-darkness her chums could see the worried look on her face.

Suddenly there was a crashing through the underbrush, announcing the approach of someone.

“Here he comes!” exclaimed Amy.

“Let’s call!” suggested Grace.

“Wait a minute,” advised Betty.

The figure of a young man came into view. He looked about him nervously, turning his head from side to side like a timid bird.

“That isn’t Tom!” said Mollie.

Low as her voice was the youth heard. He fairly leaped forward, and Betty, as she had a better glimpse of him, spoke:

“It’s The Loon! The one who saved our boat for us!”

