

FICTION

Laura Lee Hope

The Outdoor Girls in Florida

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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FICTION

The Outdoor Girls In Florida

OR

**WINTERING IN THE
SUNNY SOUTH**

BY

LAURA LEE HOPE

AUTHOR OF "THE OUTDOOR GIRLS OF DEEPPDALE," "THE
OUTDOOR GIRLS IN A MOTOR CAR," "THE BOBBSEY
TWINS," "THE BOBBSEY TWINS AT
SCHOOL," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK
GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS

BOOKS FOR GIRLS

BY LAURA LEE HOPE

12mo. Cloth. Illustrated. Price per volume, 40 cents, postpaid.

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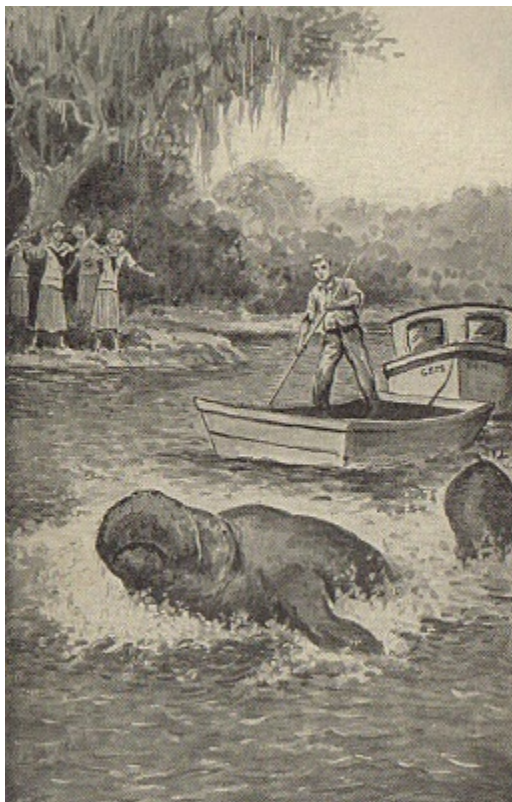
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THE OUTDOOR GIRLS IN FLORIDA



"THAT'S A MANATEE--A SEA-COW SOME
FOLKS CALL 'EM," ANSWERED THE
YOUTH.--[Page 126.](#)

The Outdoor Girls in Florida.

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THE OUTDOOR GIRLS IN FLORIDA

CHAPTER I

BAD NEWS

"Why, Grace, what in the world is the matter? You've been crying!"

"Yes, I have, Betty. But don't mind me. It's all so sudden. Come in. I shall be all right presently. Don't mind!"

Grace Ford tried to repress her emotion, but the cause of her tears was evidently too recent, or the effort at self-control too much for her, for she gave way to another outburst, sobbing this time on the shoulder of Betty Nelson, who patted her sympathetically, and murmured soothingly to her chum.

"But what is it, Grace?" Betty asked, after waiting a minute.

"I--I'll tell you in a moment or two, Betty. Just--just wait," and the tall, graceful girl made a more successful effort to master her feelings.

"Here come Amy and Mollie," went on Betty, as she glanced from the library window and saw two girls walking up the path opened across the lawn through the mass of newly fallen snow. "Do you want to meet them, Grace; or shall I say you don't feel well--have a headache? They'll understand. And perhaps in a little while----"

"No--no, Betty. It's sweet of you to want to help me; but Amy and Mollie might just as well know now as later. I'll be able to see them--in a little while. It--it's all so sudden."

"But what does it all mean, Grace? I can't understand. Is anyone dead--or--or hurt?" and Betty Nelson, who had called at the house of Grace to talk over plans for a dance they were going to attend the following week, looked anxiously at her chum. Only the day before Grace had seemed like her nearly-always jolly self. She and her three chums, including Betty, had been down town shopping, and Grace, as usual, had indulged in chocolates--her one failing, if such it can be called.

"Surely she can't be ill," thought Betty. "Ill from too many chocolates? I've seen her take twice as many as she did yesterday, and she doesn't look ill."

With this half-formed thought in her mind Betty looked more critically at her chum. Aside from the tears--which seldom add to a girl's beauty--there was no change in Grace Ford.

That is, no change except one caused by something rather mysterious, Betty thought--something that was hard for Grace to tell, but which had deeply affected her.

There came a ring at the door. Betty started toward it from the library, where she and Grace had gone when Grace let her chum in a short time before.

"Shall I answer, Grace?" inquired Betty, hesitating.

"Yes, do, please. I think Katy is with mamma. She took the news very much to heart. Let Amy and Mollie in, and then I'll tell you all about it. Oh, but I don't know what to do!"

"Now look here, Grace Ford!" exclaimed Betty briskly, pausing a moment on her way to the door. "You just stop this! If no one is dead, and no one is hurt, then it can't be so very dreadful. You just stop now, and when we all get together we'll help you in whatever trouble you have. You know that; don't you?"

"Oh, yes, Betty, I do. You aren't the 'Little Captain' to all of us for nothing. I'll try and not cry any more."

"Do. It--it isn't at all becoming. Your nose is positively like a--lobster!"

"It is not, Betty Nelson!" Grace flared.

"It certainly is. Look in the glass if you don't believe me. There--take my chamois and give it a little rub before I let in Amy and Mollie. It's only nice, clean talcum--you needn't think it's powder."

"All right--as if talcum wasn't powder, though," and Grace smiled through the traces of her recent tears.

"That's better," decided Betty, with a nod of her shapely head and a bright look from her sparkling eyes. "Yes, I'll be there in a moment," she called as there came another ring at the bell.

"Shall I bring them right in, Grace?" she called over her shoulder, as she neared the door.

"Yes--yes. I might as well--have it over with," faltered the weeping one.

"Gracious, you'd think someone was going to be hanged, or beheaded, or sent to the galleys for life--or some other dreadful thing such as we read of in our ancient histories," commented Betty. "Cheer up, Grace. There may be worse to come."

"It's awfully good of you, Betty, to try and cheer me, only, if you understood--but there--let them in. They must be perishing!"

"Oh, it isn't so cold. You don't feel well, that's all. Hello, Amy--Mollie. Come in!" she greeted the other girls, at the same time endeavoring by nods and winks to convey some idea that all was not well with Grace.

But if Betty hoped to convey a quiet intimation that something out of the ordinary had happened she did not succeed. In her eagerness to warn the newcomers not to ask questions she overdid it, and succeeded only in making them alarmed.

"What--what is it?" asked Mollie, in a sort of stage whisper.

"Oh, nothing like that," said Betty, seeing that she was only making matters worse.

"Who--who is----" began Amy.

"No one!" said Betty, half-sharply. "Don't put on such a mournful look, Amy. But Grace has had some bad news, I expect, so I let you in."

"Bad news!" echoed Mollie.

"What kind?" inquired Amy.

"I don't know--yet. She's going to tell us."

The two newcomers, divesting themselves of their rubbers, walked on tiptoe toward the library, preceded by Betty. The latter heard their cautious approach and turned on them quickly.

"Nobody's asleep!" she exclaimed. "Why don't you act--naturally?"

"Why don't you, yourself, Betty Nelson?" demanded Mollie Billette, quickly, her dark eyes flashing. "You meet us as if--as if something terrible had happened, and because we live up to the part, and behave ourselves, you----"

"Hush, please," begged gentle Amy, for well she knew Mollie's failing--an exceedingly quick temper.

"I beg your pardon," spoke Mollie, contritely. "I forgot myself."

"That's all right," said Betty, with a smile. "I don't blame you. But we must all help Grace now. She feels very bad."

As the three entered the library they saw their chum standing near a window, looking out over the snow-covered lawn. Grace did not turn at the approach of her friends.

Then Amy stole softly up to her, and, reaching up her arms, tried to put them around Grace's neck. But Grace was tall, while Amy was rather short, so the little act of kindness could not be carried out.

Mollie laughed a little. She could not help it.

Amy flushed. She was rather sensitive on the point of her stature.

"Don't mind them, Amy," said Grace quickly, as she turned about, placing her own arms around the other. "I know I am too tall, and I seem to keep on growing. Hello, Mollie dear. I'm so glad you came," and she kissed the two newcomers.

Her eyes filled with tears again, seeing which Betty called out:

"Now, Grace, remember you promised not to do that any more. Just be brave, and tell us all about it; that is, if we can help you in any manner."

"I--I don't know whether you can or not," spoke Grace slowly, "but I'll tell you just the same. It's--it's about my brother Will!"

She paused a moment, catching her breath as she gave this piece of information.

"Has he--has he----" began Betty, hoping to make it easier for Grace to tell.

"No, he hasn't done anything to attract public attention this time," went on Grace. "But he has run away."

"Run away!"

It was a surprised chorus from the three visitors.

"Yes he has left Uncle Isaac's home--stopped work in the cotton mill, and gone--no one knows where."

"Why, Grace!" exclaimed Mollie. "Do you really mean it?"

Grace nodded. She could not speak for a moment.

"How did it happen?" asked Betty.

"Who told you?" Amy wanted to know.

"Uncle Isaac himself told us," resumed Grace, after a pause. "As for how it happened we don't know yet. Uncle Isaac is on his way now to give us some particulars. He just telephoned to mamma, and that is what upset us all. I have sent for papa to come home from the office. He will be here to meet Uncle Isaac I hope. Oh, isn't it dreadful!"

"But perhaps it is only some boyish prank," suggested Betty hopefully. "What are the particulars? Perhaps he has only gone off with some friends, and will come back again, just as he did the--other time."

"The other time," as Betty called it was rather a delicate subject with the Ford family, for Will with some chums had gotten into a little difficulty not long before this story opens, and the present complication was an outcome of that. I shall describe them in order presently.

"No, I don't believe it is a prank this time," went on Grace. "He has been gone some time, and we never knew it until Uncle Isaac mentioned it casually over the telephone. Oh, I wish he would come! We can't do a thing until we hear the particulars. Then papa will start an inquiry, I think. Poor Will! I hope he is not--not hurt!" and again Grace showed symptoms of tears.

"Now stop that!" commanded the Little Captain sharply. "You know it does no good to worry. Wait until you have some real facts to go on."

"Yes, do," urged Mollie.

"But he isn't your brother," said Grace in retort. "How would you like it, Mollie Billette, if Paul should be missing some day?"

"Oh, I'd feel dreadful, of course. But Paul and Dodo get into so many scrapes," she added, with a curious shrug of her shoulders, in which she betrayed her French ancestry--"so very many scrapes, my dears, that we are past being shocked."

But, for all Mollie spoke so lightly, she knew--and so did her chums--that should anything happen to the twins Mollie would be the first to show emotion.

"Have you heard no word from Will himself?" asked Betty, after a pause.

"Not a word, and that makes it seem all the worse. If we only had some word--something to go by, we might not feel so bad. But it came like a bolt out of a blue sky--what Uncle Isaac telephoned about an hour ago. He is down town attending to business, and he said he'd come up as soon as he could. He was surprised himself, to know that Will was not home."

"Then he knew that he had left Atlanta?" asked Mollie.

"Yes, but he supposed Will had started back home."

"I'm afraid I don't exactly understand it all," said Amy in a low voice. "You know I've been away, and----"

"Oh, of course!" exclaimed Grace. "I forgot that you had been off with that newly-found brother of yours. Well, you see, Amy, Will disgraced himself a while ago----"

"I don't call it much of a disgrace," said Betty in defense of the absent one.

"Well, papa did," said Grace. "I thought perhaps he was a little too severe on Will, but mamma said it was best to be severe at the start."

"What did he do?" asked Amy.

"I didn't hear all the particulars," went on Grace. "But you know that new Latin teacher the High School boys have-- Professor Cark, his name is."

Amy nodded.

"Well, the boys didn't like him from the very start," proceeded Grace, "and I guess he didn't like the boys any too well. They played some tricks on him, and he retaliated by doubling up on their lessons. Then one night he was kidnapped--taken from his boarding place and hazed. It was nothing very bad, but the faculty held a meeting, and voted to expel all the boys concerned in it. Will was one, and papa was so angry that he said he would punish Will in a way he wouldn't forget. He said he'd take him out of school, before he'd have him expelled, and make him lose a term.

"So poor Will was given his choice of starting the study of law in papa's office, or going to work for Uncle Isaac Ford--papa's brother. Uncle Isaac has a big cotton mill down in Atlanta, Georgia, you know. Papa thought it would be a good thing for Will to see what hard work meant. At the same time it would take him away from Deepdale, and out of the influence of some of the boys who were responsible for the hazing. I don't believe Will was one of the ringleaders."

"And did he go South?" asked Amy.

"He did. He chose to work for Uncle Isaac instead of studying law here. And for the past month or so he has been in the mill. Then, all of a sudden, he disappears."

"But how?" asked Mollie.

"We don't know the particulars," said Grace. "We supposed up to about an hour ago, that Will was in Atlanta, though we wondered why he didn't write. But then he never was very good at sending letters. Then came this 'phone message. I answered and I was surprised to hear Uncle Isaac speaking.

"At first I thought he was talking from Atlanta, and I was afraid something had happened. But Uncle Isaac said he was here--in Deepdale, and then he startled me by asking how Will was.

"Why, isn't he down in your mill?" I asked. Uncle Isaac said he was not--that Will had not come to work one morning, and had left a note saying that he was going to quit. Of course Uncle Isaac thought Will had come back home. But when I told him we had not seen my brother, why, Uncle Isaac was as startled as I was. He said he'd come right up here and tell us all he knew."

Grace paused. She had spoken rather at length.

"Well, that is rather strange," murmured Mollie.

"But of course it may be easily explained when your Uncle comes," said Betty.

"There he is now!" cried Grace, glancing out of a window. "And he has papa with him. He must have stopped at the office. Oh, I'm so glad papa is here!" and she hurried to the front door to let them in.

CHAPTER II

GOOD NEWS

"Oh, father!" gasped Grace, as she slipped into his waiting arms. Hardly a greeting did she give to Uncle Isaac, but perhaps this was on account of having spoken to him over the telephone shortly before. "Oh, father! Where is poor Will?"

"I don't know, Grace," answered Mr. Ford gently. "But don't worry. We shall find him. How is your mother?"

"Oh, she feels it dreadfully of course. She's been wanting you so much."

"I came as soon as I could. Your Uncle Isaac stopped for me after telephoning the news to you."

"Yes, I allowed that was the best procedure," said Mr. Ford Sr., he being the elder brother of the father of Grace. Uncle Isaac spoke with a slight Southern accent, but not very pronounced, since he had lived most of his life in the North.

"I'll see your mother first, Grace, and then we'll discuss what's best to be done," went on Mr. Ford. "It was rather a shock to me."

"Oh, father! I hope nothing has happened to poor Will!" sighed Grace.

"Well, if there has, he brought it on himself," said Uncle Isaac sharply. "He had a good place with me, and he could have stayed there and learned the business. Instead of that he chose to act like a----"

"Never mind, Isaac," spoke Mr. Ford quickly. "The thing is done, and we'll have to make the best of it. Perhaps I acted a bit hastily in sending him to you."

"It would have done him good if he had stayed with me. But boys are so foolish."

"And I presume you and I were--at Will's age," said the father. "Well, I'll go see your mother, Grace, and then I'll be down again. Is someone here?" and he looked at the rubbers in the hall.

"Yes, Betty, Mollie and Amy."

"Oh, that's all right. You can stay with them until I come down. Isaac, if you are hungry I'll have some lunch sent up."

"Not for me. I never eat between meals," and Uncle Isaac spoke with firmness.

As Betty looked out of a crack in the library door she made up her mind that Mr. Ford's brother seldom did anything "between meals." He seemed to be a man who lived by hard and fast rules, and he had not the most kindly face and manner in the world. He was quite a contrast to Grace's father.

"Maybe that's why Will left him," mused Betty. "I'm sure he looks as if he would be a hard master. Poor Will!"

"I'll just sit in here and look at the paper," went on Uncle Isaac, starting toward the library.

"The girls--my chums--are in there," said Grace quickly. "Of course, if you----"

"Excuse me!" interrupted Uncle Isaac. "I'll meet them later, after your father and I have straightened out this tangle--if it can be done. I'll sit in the parlor, though I'm not used to it. No use wearing out the best carpet. Is anyone in the dining room?"

"They are getting ready for dinner," said Grace with a smile, to which the elderly man did not respond. "I guess you'll have to go to the parlor, Uncle Isaac. Of course we'll entertain you, but----"

"No, I'd rather look over the paper. Go along, Jim, and comfort Margaret all you can. I'm sure it wasn't my fault----"

"Of course not, Isaac. I'll be back presently," and Mr. Ford started for his wife's room. Grace rejoined her chums, and Uncle Isaac went to the parlor.

And, while the scene is thus cleared for a moment I will take advantage of it to make my new readers somewhat better acquainted with the characters and setting of this story.

The initial volume of this series was "The Outdoor Girls of Deepdale; Or, Camping and Tramping for Fun and

Health," and in that was related how Betty, Amy, Mollie and Grace had gone on a walking trip, and how they solved the strange secret of a five hundred dollar bill.

The second book brought our heroines into the midst of summer, and also saw them started on a voyage in Betty's motor boat. This book, called: "The Outdoor Girls at Rainbow Lake; Or, the Stirring Cruise of the Motor Boat *Gem*," had to do, in a measure, with a curious happening on an island, following the strange loss of some valuable papers, when a horse Grace was riding ran away with her. And how the papers were recovered--but there. It would not be "playing the game" to go into details now.

"The Outdoor Girls in a Motor Car; Or, The Haunted Mansion of Shadow Valley," was the third book of the series. As the sub-title indicates there really was a house where strange manifestations took place, and when Mollie was captured by the "ghost," her chums were very much alarmed.

The adventures of our friends in the touring car, which Mollie owned, carried them well into Fall, and when the first snow came, and the girls had the chance to go to the woods, they took advantage of the opportunity. In the fourth book, "The Outdoor Girls in a Winter Camp; Or, Glorious Days on Skates and Ice boats," there was related how a certain property dispute, involving Mr. Ford, was settled through good luck favoring the girls. Also how Amy was claimed by a brother, of whose existence she was unaware.

They had been back from camp some little time now, when the strange disappearance of Will Ford gave them new food for thought and action.

"Oh, if we only could find him for you, Grace!" exclaimed Betty, when her chum had returned to the library, after greeting her father. "If we only could."

"Yes. If only we could pick him up, as we did that five hundred dollar bill," added Mollie.

"We might," said Amy, half seriously.

And the girls discussed this possibility--one not so remote as might seem at first, since they had done many strange things of late.

A word or two more before I go on.

The girls, as I have intimated, lived in the city of Deepdale, in the heart of the Empire State. Deepdale--Dear Deepdale as the girls called it--lived up to its name. It was a charming town, with some country features that made it all the nicer. It nestled in a bend of the Argono River, a stream of some importance commercially.

The four girls I have already named--Grace Ford, Mollie Billette, Betty Nelson and Amy. In the first volume the latter was Amy Stonington, but a mystery concerning her had been solved, and a brother who had long sought her, at last found her. He was Henry Blackford, who was concerned in the five hundred dollar bill mystery, and he recognized Amy as his sister in a peculiar way. So Amy Stonington became Amy Blackford, and Mr. and Mrs. John Stonington, instead of being her uncle and aunt, were mere strangers to her.

No, not mere strangers, either, for they had not brought her up from a baby to so easily relinquish her now. They could not bear to give her up, and as she had no other relatives, except her brother, as far as she knew, and as he had to travel about considerably in his business, Amy remained with those she had so long regarded as her parents. She was very glad to do so.

Betty was the only child, while Grace had, as I have mentioned, a brother Will. Mollie had a small brother and sister--the twins, Dora (or "Dodo") and Paul. Her mother was a well-to-do widow, and the parents of the other girls were wealthy, but made no display of their means.

As I have noted, Will's foolish prank had brought its punishment, though perhaps he did not merit it as much as did some of his chums. One, Frank Haley, had been expelled, and another had been suspended for three weeks. But to Will would seem to have come the heavier punishment, now that he was away from home, no one knew where.

Mr. Ford came down from his wife's room. Grace glided out to him.

"How is she?" the girl inquired.

"I have made her feel a little easier," he announced. "Now we will hear what Uncle Isaac has to say."

It was not a great deal.

"I put Will right to work, as you directed me, Jim," the visitor said to his brother. "Work is good for boys, and I

started him at the bottom of the ladder. That's what you wanted; wasn't it?"

"Well, I did think so at the time, after he got into that scrape," said Mr. Ford. "I was pretty well provoked, but I begin to think now I was a bit too harsh with him."

"Nonsense!" snorted Uncle Isaac. "Harshness is good for boys. I wasn't any harsher on him than on any of the boys that work in my mill. I made him toe the mark--that's all."

"But Will has a sensitive nature," said his father slowly. "Did he give any intimation that he was going to leave?"

"Not a bit. He did his work well--that is, as well as any boys do. None of 'em are much good."

Grace caught her breath. She started to say something, but her father, by a slight motion of his head, stopped her.

"Will stayed at my home, you know," went on Uncle Isaac. "I did the best by him I knew. I didn't let him out nights, I made him read good and helpful books like 'Pilgrims Progress,' and others of the kind, and I kept him from the moving pictures.

"Well the first thing I knew he wasn't in his room when I went to call him one morning, and there was this note."

He held it out. Mr. Ford read it eagerly. All it said was:

"I can't stand it any longer. I'm going to quit."

"And he had packed up his things and left," went on Uncle Isaac. "I was dumbfounded, I was. I didn't think it was much use to hunt for him as I thought he'd come right home. He had some money--you know you gave him some."

Mr. Ford nodded.

"I didn't write, as I calculated on coming up North," went on Uncle Isaac. "Then when I telephoned, and found Will hadn't come home, I didn't know what to think."

"Nor I either," said Mr. Ford, "when you stopped in at my office and told me. When did he leave your house?"

"It will be a week to-morrow."

"And never a word from him in all that time," mused the father. "I don't like it."

Grace felt her eyes filling with tears. Betty patted her hand.

"Well, something will have to be done," said Mr. Ford with a sigh. "Isaac, let's talk this over, and see what we can do. I may have to go to Atlanta to straighten this out. I don't believe Will would deliberately set out to cause us worry."

"I'm sure he wouldn't!" declared Grace, eagerly.

Her father and uncle left to go to Mr. Ford's private office in the house, for he was a lawyer, and kept a large library at home. The girls sat in the main library, looking at one another with sad eyes.

"Oh, isn't it too bad--just after we had such fun in our winter camp!" exclaimed Grace. "Poor Will! It does seem as if there was nothing happy in this world any more."

"Oh, don't feel that way!" protested Betty. "Come, have you girls no good news to cheer her up with?" she asked, looking at Mollie and Amy.

"I'm afraid I haven't--unless it's to tell the latest funny thing Dodo and Paul did," spoke Mollie. "And I detest telling of children's pranks."

"How about you, Amy? Can't you cheer up Grace?"

"Well, I did mean to tell you when I came in; but seeing Grace so upset I almost forgot it," said Amy.

"Forgot what?" asked Betty with a smile. "Girls, I am almost sure it's something good, Amy has such a quiet way with her that she always has unexpected pleasure for us."

"I don't know whether this will be pleasure or not," went on Amy with a blush, "but Uncle Stonington (I'm going to call him that, though he is no relation)" she interjected, "Uncle Stonington has bought an orange grove in Florida, and we can have all the oranges we want. If that's good news," she finished.

"It is--fine!" declared Mollie.

"And we were talking about it to-day," resumed the quiet girl, "and he said perhaps he would take Aunty down there to stay until spring, as her health is not very good. And I'll probably go----"

"Oh, Amy!"

It was a protesting chorus.

"And I mentioned you girls, and Uncle Stonington said I could bring you down--if you'd come--all of you--to a Florida orange grove."

"Amy Stonington--I mean Blackford--I'm just going to hug you!" cried Betty. "Go! Of course we'll go!"

"After we find Will," put in Grace in a low voice.



CHAPTER III

WILL'S LETTER

Amy's announcement--unexpected as it was--had two effects. It dispelled, for a time, the gloom that had come with the news of Will Ford's disappearance, and it gave the girls something to talk about, to speculate over and to plan for.

"I must confess," admitted Betty, "that our strenuous life this Fall and Summer, living in the outdoors, has unfitted us for the hum-drum sort of existence that used to satisfy us. We seem to want some excitement all the while now."

"That's so," agreed Mollie. "But outdoor life is a little too chilling these days."

There had been a series of storms and cold weather in Deepdale, ever since the girls had returned from the logging camp.

"But it must be perfectly lovely in Florida now," spoke Grace, who found that by joining in the conversation she did not think so much about her missing brother. "The weather there in our winter season is delightful. Where is Mr. Stonington's orange grove, Amy--near Palm Beach?"

"No, it is somewhere in the Indian River section, I believe. I don't know just where."

"And do you really mean to say you can take us there?" asked Betty. "Oh, you're a dear!"

"Uncle Stonington said he would be glad if I could take you girls," said Amy. "He got the grove through some sort of a business deal. He doesn't know anything about raising oranges, but there are men in charge who do. There is quite a big sort of place--a ranch I believe they call it."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Betty. "Ranches are only in the West. They are inhabited by--cow-punchers," and she seemed very proud of her knowledge.

"Why do they have to punch the cows?" asked Mollie. "Westemers use such funny words."

"Oh, they don't really punch them," said Grace. "I've heard Will and the boys talk about it. It's just a name. But there are no ranches in Florida."

"Well, then it's just a plain orange grove," said Amy. "There is a large house, some bungalows and other buildings. And there is a river and a lake----"

"My motor boat!" cried Betty.

"What's the matter with it?" demanded Mollie. "Do you see it?"

"No, but I wonder if we could take it along?"

"I'll ask Uncle Stonington," said Amy. "I'm sure you can. Oh, I do hope you girls can go! Do you think you can?"

"I'm going--if I have to walk!" declared Betty. "I can send my boat by freight, and we can have the most delightful times ever! Oh, Amy!" and she hugged her chum again.

"I'm not sure I can go," observed Grace, slowly. "If poor Will is in trouble----"

"We'll get him out!" cried Mollie. "Of course you'll go. And I'll go, too! We'll all go. We'll be outdoor girls down where there's no winter!"

"It sounds--enticing," murmured Grace, who did not like the cold weather. "Think of orange blossoms----"

"And brides!" completed Betty. "Oh, girls!"

"Silly!" chimed in Mollie.

"Is Mrs. Stonington very ill?" asked Betty. "You said something about her going down there."

"She is not at all well," spoke Amy. "Uncle Stonington is quite worried about her. I think when it came to getting the orange grove he took it as much on her account as on his own. The doctor said the air down there would do her good."

"Is it as bad as that?" asked Mollie, in a low voice.

"Well, she is not at all well," Amy replied. "But we all have hopes that a change will benefit her. I do hope you girls

will come with me. I'll be so lonesome without you."

"Oh, we'll come," said Mollie, with much confidence.

They talked of the Florida possibilities at some length, and Betty was a bit anxious as to how she could get her motor boat down to the Land of the Everglades.

"You'll have to consult that sea-going uncle of yours," suggested Mollie.

"Perhaps I shall," Betty agreed, with a smile.

"Papa and Uncle Isaac are rather long," complained Grace. "I wonder what they are going to do?"

"If your father has to go South I'm sure Uncle Stonington would be glad to have him stop at the orange grove," said Amy.

"I don't know that he'd have time," remarked Grace. "If he has to search for poor Will----"

She was interrupted by the footsteps of her father and uncle as they came from the private library. Mr. Ford--as I shall indicate Grace's father--was speaking.

"Well, I don't see anything to do but to take a trip down there," he said. "When I'm on the ground I can decide what course to take. Writing is only nervous work. And yet I don't see how I can spare the time now."

"Perhaps I could manage for you," said Uncle Isaac. "If I find Will I can bring him back to the mill, and make him work harder than ever. Hard work----"

"No, no!" exclaimed Mr. Ford, quickly. "I think Will has been punished enough. I want to get him home, and then we'll map out a course of procedure. Perhaps I gave him too heavy a sentence," and, almost unconsciously, he glanced at his brother.

Certainly Mr. Ford, Sr., looked like an inexorable judge who would exact the last farthing of a debt, or the final round of punishment. Will had evidently had no easy time.

"Well, I must think about this Southern trip," went on Will's father. "Why, you girls look as though you had been talking secrets!" he exclaimed, not wanting to inflict too much of his family troubles on the visitors.

"We have!" cried Betty. "You are not the only one going South, Mr. Ford. We may go too."

"Go South? What do you mean?" he asked.

"Mr. Stonington has purchased an orange grove in Florida," Betty went on, "and Amy has asked us all down there. Do, please, say that Grace can go!" and she blew him a kiss, for the four chums shared their parents and friends as they did their--well, let us say--chocolates.

"Florida," spoke Mr. Ford, musingly. "I wonder if, by any chance, Will could have gone there? Many young men go down South in the winter to work as waiters in the big hotels. But I hardly think he would be so foolish. Well, of course if Grace wants to go----"

"I do want to, Daddy, but poor Will----"

"Oh, I'll find him. He has just gone off on some little trip, perhaps. Very likely he has written to us and the letter has miscarried. Or he may be carrying it around in his pocket, thinking he has mailed it. Yes, I think you may go, Grace, if the others do. Don't worry about your brother. We'll have trace of him soon."

"I'm sure we all hope so," said Mollie, impulsively. "We are thinking of taking Betty's boat down with us."

"A good idea. I wish I could go. And it is fortunate that, on account of a change in the school system, you will not miss a term." For following a shift in the educational work of Deepdale, had come a reconstruction of the system. The outdoor girls were sufficiently advanced to permit of their taking several months' vacation, and still remain up to the standard required by the State regents.

"And to think of going to Florida!" cried Betty, as she walked about the room. "I know we shall just love it there."

"Young folks waste a lot more time than I did when I was young," said Mr. Ford, Sr., with a sniff.

"Perhaps we should have been better off if we had 'wasted' a little more time, as you call it," remarked his brother, as he thought of his missing son.

"Humph!" snorted Uncle Isaac.

"Well, let's get down to my office," suggested Will's father, after a pause. "I'm going to have my hands full. To trace a missing boy--though really I don't imagine that will be serious--and have a daughter go to Florida is 'going some,' as the boys say. But I guess I can manage it. Now, Isaac, if you're ready----"

He was interrupted by a ring at the bell, and the shrill call of the postman's whistle.

"I'll go," Grace exclaimed, intercepting the maid. She brought back several letters, and at the sight of the handwriting on the envelope of one she exclaimed:

"It's from Will! It's from my brother. Oh, Daddy, here's a letter from Will!"



CHAPTER IV

"COME HOME!"

Grace's announcement caused a flutter of excitement among her chums, and Mr. Ford's face showed his pleasure and surprise. But a moment later he had steeled his features into a non-committal mask, for he was really much provoked by his son's conduct, and if this was an appeal for forgiveness he wanted to be in the proper censoring attitude. At least so he reasoned.

"We'll see you again, Grace," spoke Betty, as she led the way for the other two girls to follow. She felt that the family might like to be by themselves while perusing the first letter from Will since his latest escapade.

"Oh, don't go!" exclaimed Grace, guessing her chums' intention. "Stay and hear what Will has to say. I'm sure papa would want you to," and she looked at Mr. Ford, who was nervously tearing open the envelope. His brother was watching him anxiously, but it was not a kindly look on Uncle Isaac's face.

At first, when it seemed as if something seriously might have happened to Will, the elderly man was rather alarmed, thinking perhaps he might be blamed. Now that a communication had come from the youth, seeming to indicate that all was well with him, his former employer was ready to deal harshly with him. He was even meditating what form of punishment could be applied, and he planned harder tasks for him, in case his father should send Will back to the cotton mill in Atlanta.

"Yes, stay, by all means," spoke the younger Mr. Ford, in rather absent-minded tones, as he flipped open the letter. "We have no secrets from you girls, and if you are going to Florida, and Will is in that neighborhood, he can take a run over and see you. Let's see now; what does the rascal say?"

There was a caressing note in the father's voice in spite of the somewhat stern look on his face, and he slowly read the letter, half aloud. The girls could catch a word here and there. Grace was leaning forward expectantly, her lips parted. The strain had told on her, and her eyes were still red from the tears she could not hold back.

"Dear Father and All," read Mr. Ford. "Hum--yes--I wonder if he's going to ask for money. 'I suppose this will surprise you'--yes, Will was always good on surprises."

"Oh, father, do please get on with the letter--tell us what has happened to Will!" begged Grace. "We're so anxious! Mother will want to know. Read faster, please, if you can; won't you, father?"

"All right, Grace. But nothing much seems to have happened to him so far. Hello, what's this, though? 'Going to strike out for myself. Can't stand Uncle'--um--'will write particulars later--I have a good chance for an opening'--I wonder if it's as a waiter in some Palm Beach hotel? 'There may be a good thing in this. I can learn the business, the agent says'--"

"Oh, Daddy, please read it right!" importuned Grace. "We can't tell what Will says and what you make up as you go along. Read it yourself, and tell us what it means. Then I'll go to mamma."

"Yes, and if he says anything against me, don't be afraid to come out with it," interjected Uncle Isaac. "Will and I didn't get along well--that's no secret. He didn't like work, and he didn't hesitate to say so. I've no doubt he had hard feelings against me, but I say here and now that I treated him as I would my own son. I made him work harder than I would my own son, in fact, for I felt that I had a duty to do by Will."

"And I guess you did it--too well," muttered Grace, with rather a vindictive look at her uncle, which look, however, he did not see.

"Well, to be frank with you, Isaac," spoke Mr. Ford, "the boy says that he did not like the life in the factory. But I did not suppose he would. I did not send him there to like it, but I thought the discipline would do him good. However, he seems to have struck out for himself."

"But, Daddy!" cried Grace, clinging to his arm. "What has happened? Where is Will? Where did he go?"

"There now," he said, soothingly. "It seems to be all right, and Will is in no danger. All your tears were wasted. To be brief, he writes that he did not like the work in the mill, and getting a chance to go to Jacksonville, Florida, he took it and went without the formality of a good-bye."

"What is he doing in Jacksonville?" asked Mollie. "If we go to Amy's orange grove we may see him."

"He writes that he has a chance to get in with a concern that is going to develop some of the Everglade lands," went on Mr. Ford, referring to the letter. 'The company plans to drain the swamps, and grow pecans, oranges and other tropical fruits and nuts.' Will says he was offered a sort of secretaryship to one of the developers, and took it.

"He asks my permission to stay and 'make good,' as he calls it. He thinks it is a great chance; better even than the cotton business, Isaac."

"Oh, yes, I s'pose so. There's a lot of folks been fooled in those Everglade-developing concerns, though. They're fakes, to my way of thinking. But let him live and learn. That's the only way."

"Are you going to let him stay down there?" asked Grace.

"Well, I don't know," said Mr. Ford, musingly. "I don't bank much on Will's knowledge of affairs. This company may be all right, and again it may not. I'd rather investigate a bit."

"Will says," he went on, again referring to the letter, "that he is sorry he went off in the abrupt way he did, but he felt that it was the only method to pursue. He says he feared you would stop him, if you heard about it, Isaac."

"I'd have tried, anyhow," was the grim comment.

"And as the opportunity had to be taken up quickly, or be lost, Will went away in a hurry," continued his father. "He says he wants to show all of us that he can make his own way in the world, if given a chance, and he doesn't want to come back until he has done so. He thinks he has had enough of school. He sends his love to--to all of us--and his mother, and says he will write again soon, and run up for a few days' visit as soon as he can get the time."

Mr. Ford's voice faltered a little as he went on. After all, he loved Will very much, and he knew that it was only the spirit of a proud boy that was keeping him away from home.

"Are you going to let him stay, Daddy?" asked Grace again.

"No, Grace, I think I'll write to him to come home," replied Mr. Ford. "I think this has been a lesson to him. He gives his prospective Jacksonville address in this note. I'll just send him a wire."

Going to the telephone, Mr. Ford dictated this brief telegram to his son.

"Come home. All is forgiven."

"It's like one of those advertisements you see in the newspapers," said Grace, with a little laugh.

She was much relieved now, and so were her chums. They could think with more pleasure of the prospective trip to Florida.

"But if Will left you a week ago, Uncle Isaac, I don't see why this letter has only now arrived," spoke Grace. "When is it postmarked, father?"

"It reached Deepdale to-day, but it was mailed in--let me see--why, I can't make out the other mark, nor the date either."

"Let me try," suggested Uncle Isaac, putting on his glasses. But he had no better luck.

"Either Will carried that letter around in his pocket after writing it," said Mr. Ford, "or he dropped it in some obscure postoffice where their cancelling stamps are worn out and letters go only once a week or so. The letter was written on the night he left your house, evidently," he said to his brother, indicating the superscription. "I guess the mails down your way are not very certain, Isaac."

"Not always. Well, I'm glad the boy is all right. I tried to do my duty by him, as I promised I would, Jim."

"I know you did, Isaac, and I think this will be a lesson to him. I'll be glad to have him back, though. For I--I've missed him," and again Mr. Ford's voice faltered.

"So have I," said Grace, softly. "And this will make mamma's headache better. I'm going up to tell her."

"And we'll be going, now that you have good news," remarked Betty. "Wasn't it odd to get good and bad news so close together?"

"But the good came last--and that makes it the best," observed Amy with a smile.

Mr. Ford gave Grace her brother's letter to take up to her mother, while he and his brother prepared to go down town

again, to finish transacting some business that had called the Southerner up North.

"And I guess I'd better telegraph Will some money while I am at it," his father said. "He writes that he has plenty of cash, but his idea of a lot of money is a few one dollar bills and a pocket full of change. I'll wire twenty-five dollars to him in Jacksonville to come home with."

"I'll be down in a minute, girls," called Grace, as she hurried up stairs to her mother's room. "Wait for me, and we'll talk about this Florida trip."

When Grace came down, having made her mother happy with her good news, she was eating chocolates.

"Now we know she is all right," laughed Betty.

CHAPTER V

MISSING AGAIN

"And to think that in a few more days we'll leave all this behind us--all the cold, the icicles, the snow, the biting winds--leave it all, and sail into a land of sunshine and oranges and Spanish moss and magnolias and----"

"Alligators!" finished Betty for Grace, who was thus going into raptures over the prospect before them, as she looked over the wintry landscape that was in full view just outside the window of Amy's home. I say Amy's home, for, though it had developed that she was no relative of Mr. and Mrs. Stonington, still they insisted that she call their home hers as long as she liked. So it was at Amy's home, then, that her chums had gathered to talk over the trip to Florida.

It was the day after the somewhat startling developments regarding Will Ford, and Mr. Ford, true to his determination, had telegraphed his son twenty-five dollars.

"Well, of course Florida will be lovely!" exclaimed Mollie, "and I love oranges----"

"To say nothing of orange blossoms," interjected Grace.

"I said oranges!" went on Mollie, putting emphasis on the word. "I like them as well as anyone, but I love winter and skating and ice boating, too."

"Oh, I just can't bear cold weather!" said Grace, with a shiver, and a look toward the chair on which, in a fluffy pile, rested her furs--and Grace looked handsome in the sable set that her father had given to her at Christmas.

"You didn't seem so cold when we were up in the old lumber camp," remarked Betty. "You skated and ice-boated with the rest of us, and seemed to enjoy it."

"I know, but it was a different sort of cold up there--so dry, and not so penetrating as down here. The wind seems to go right through me," and again the tall girl shivered.

"It doesn't take long----" began Mollie, and then she stopped short and bit her lips to keep back a smile.

"Long to do what?" asked Grace, curiously.

"Never mind," spoke Mollie. "You might get angry."

"I will not. I haven't your----"

This time it was Grace who caught herself in time.

"Go on--say it. You may as well as think it!" snapped Mollie, with some asperity. "You were going to say you hadn't my temper, weren't you, now?"

"Well, yes, I was," said Grace, slowly. "And you were going to say I was so thin that the wind didn't take long to go through me; weren't you?" challenged Grace.

"Yes, I was, and----"

"Girls--Mollie--Grace!" cried Betty, anxious not to see a quarrel. "What can I do to pour oil on troubled waters? Let's talk about--Florida."

"Don't pour cod liver oil, whatever you do," said Grace, quickly. "I had to take some of the horrid stuff the last cough I had, and I can taste it yet. Where are my chocolates? Oh, thank you, Amy," as the latter passed them over. "Have some. These have maraschino cherries inside."

"Leave it to Grace to discover something luxurious in the candy line," observed Mollie.

"Well, I notice that you're only too glad to eat them," and Grace fairly snapped out the words.

"Oh, dear! It seems hopeless to keep peace between you two to-day," sighed Betty. "Can't you be nice? Especially after Amy has asked us over here to talk about the trip. Let's talk about----"

"What to wear!" exclaimed Amy, with a bright thought. "You see we'll have to take two sets of clothing. One to wear until we get to Florida, and the other after we arrive at the orange grove. We'll need thin things there. Aunt Stonington is making me up some pretty voile and white muslin dresses."

"I was wondering whether I ought to take my furs," said Grace.

"Furs in Florida!" cried Mollie. "Never!"

"But it will be cold going down," said Grace. "It's cold even in Washington, now. I think I'll wear them. I may not get another chance this winter if we stay there very long."

"We can stay as long as we like," said Amy. "Uncle Stonington says he'll remain until Spring, anyhow, for the business will take until then to get going properly. Then, too, he is anxious about Aunty's health. The doctor says the longer she stays in a mild climate the better she will be."

"She doesn't look very well," spoke Betty in a low voice. Mrs. Stonington had greeted the girls as they came to call on Amy, and had then gone to lie down. The callers had all noticed how frail and worn she seemed. Perhaps the shock of almost losing Amy had something to do with it. But there also appeared to be the seeds of some deep-seated malady present in her system. And a look at Mr. Stonington's face told that he, too, was worrying. But the trip to Florida might work wonders. They all hoped so, at any rate.

"If we're going to take Bet's boat we ought to wear our sailor suits part of the time," suggested Mollie. "Are you going to take the *Gem*?"

"What about that, Amy?" questioned Betty. "Did you inquire whether there are navigable waters near the orange grove?"

"There are. The grove is near the town of Bentonville, on the Mayfair River, which empties into Lake Chad, so I think there will be plenty of chance to go boating. The grove is in the Indian River section, where some of the finest oranges grow."

"Then the *Gem* goes along," decided Betty. "I'm going to stop at the freight office on my way home, and see about having it crated and shipped."

Discussing what they would take in the way of dresses, and other feminine accessories, talking over prospective trips in the motor boat, speculating as to whether Will or any of his boy chums would go to Florida for a brief visit, made the winter afternoon pass quickly.

"It would be nice if Will and some of the other boys could come down," said Mollie, reflectively.

"By 'some of the others' meaning Allen Washburn, I suppose," said Mollie, slyly, for Betty's liking for the young lawyer was no secret, nor was his for her.

"Speak for yourself, please," said the "Little Captain," a flush mounting to her already rosy cheeks. "Though of course if Will is coming home he won't want to go back again," she concluded.

"Hardly, I fancy," agreed Grace. "That's the last chocolate. I must get some more for to-night. Who's going downtown?"

They all were, it developed, and on the way Betty stopped at the railroad freight office and arranged to have a man sent to the boathouse to crate the *Gem*. Then it could be taken to the railroad on a truck.

"And what will we do with it when we get to Bentonville?" asked Amy. "It does look so big out of the water," for, after the visit to the freight office they had gone to where the *Gem* was stored in winter quarters.

"Oh, we can manage it there," said Betty.

"There must be plenty of men and trucks down there."

"Uncle Stonington says there are other motor boats on the river, so there must be ways of getting them on and off," put in Amy.

Grace got her chocolates, and also insisted on buying hot drinks for her chums.

"For I simply can't seem to get warm," she declared, as she sipped hers.

"And with all those furs," remarked Betty. "I guess you'll have to live in the South in Winter, Grace."

"I wish I could."

As the girls walked with Grace toward her house, the Ford home being the first on their way, they saw a messenger boy with his little black-covered book and a bunch of telegrams just turning into the gate.

"There's a message!" exclaimed Grace, breaking into a run. "I want to take it from him before he rings the bell. Mamma is so nervous at the sight of a telegram. She always thinks the worst thing has happened. I suppose this is from Will, saying he is on his way home. Poor boy! he has had a lesson."

"I feel sorry for him, too," said Betty.

"I'll take the message," spoke Grace to the boy, as she signed the extended book. "Prepaid? Yes. Here is a dime for yourself. Get a hot chocolate; you must be cold."

"T'anks!" was the reply. "I kin git two for dat!"

"I hope he won't buy cigarettes," ventured Mollie.

"Nonsense!" answered Grace, as she tore open the message, which was addressed to her father. She felt she had a right to do this, as, had it been some business communication, she argued, it would have gone to Mr. Ford's office. Grace felt sure it was from her brother.

Quickly she read the brief message in the waning light of the winter day. Then she swayed and her face paled.

"What is it--bad news?" asked Betty quickly, as she put her arms around her chum.

"Yes--yes. It's about--Will. Read it. Poor mother! How can I tell her? And she has been expecting him so!"

Betty glanced at the few words. They were:

"Cannot locate Will Ford at Jacksonville address given. Am holding the twenty-five dollars subject to your order. Party was at address noted, but information to our agent here is to effect that young man left in company with a labor contractor who does not bear a very good reputation. Young man's boarding mistress worried. What shall we do?"

The message was to Mr. Ford. It was from Jacksonville, and was signed by the telegraph operator there.

"Will is missing again!" sobbed Grace. "Oh, what shall I do? What shall I do?"

CHAPTER VI

AN APPEAL FOR HELP

For one of the very few times in her life when confronted by an emergency the "Little Captain" did not know quite what to do. Grace clung to Betty, murmuring over and over again:

"What shall I say? What shall I do?"

Amy and Mollie stared uncomprehendingly at one another. Grace still held the telegram that had brought more bad news.

Then Betty got her senses in working order.

"In the first place," she said, "you mustn't let your mother know about this, Grace. You must keep it from her. In the second place your father must be told at once. Now you go in and act as if nothing had happened. I'll go see your father."

"But I can't act as if nothing had happened," protested Grace, with a wailing tone in her voice. "I'd be sure to act so strangely that mamma would suspect at once, and begin to question me."

"Then Mollie or Amy must go in with you, and help to keep up appearances. Amy, you go in and talk--play--sing--dance--do anything to keep Grace from feeling bad, and giving away the secret. As soon as Mr. Ford comes he can decide whether or not to tell his wife. Mollie, you and I will go down to his office. This is the night he gets home late; isn't it, Grace?"

"Yes. Oh, how I wish he were here now! Poor Will!"

"Well, we'll soon have him home," declared Betty. "Now you two do as I tell you. Talk about Florida--anything but what has happened. Mr. Ford will know what to do when he comes. Now, Mollie, let's hurry. Gracious! I believe it's going to snow. Well, we won't have any of that in Florida, that's a blessing for you, Grace," and Betty smiled bravely.

"We may never go now--if Will isn't found."

"Oh, he'll be all right," declared Betty, with more confidence than she felt. "Come along, Mollie."

The two set off through the gathering storm, while Grace and Amy turned into the former's house. They were under a strain, and afterward they hardly remembered what they did. But Grace did not betray the secret, at any rate. The two girls talked of many things, and when Mrs. Ford referred to the home-coming of her son Amy changed the subject as soon as she could.

Then, fortunately, Mrs. Ford went upstairs to lie down until dinner was ready, and Grace, with a sigh of relief, threw herself on a couch.

"There!" she sighed. "We can act naturally now. Poor little mother--I wonder how she will take it?"

"Oh, she is brave," said Amy. "Besides, nothing very dreadful can have happened. Will may be all right. Even if he has gone off with a labor contractor, who has a bad reputation, your brother is able to look after himself. He can appeal to the police, if necessary."

"Perhaps. Anyhow, you can look on the bright side, Amy. I wish papa would hurry."

"Oh, he will, as soon as Betty tells him."

Meanwhile Betty and Mollie were hurrying on through the storm to Mr. Ford's office. They found him working over a complicated law case, and he seemed startled when he saw the two girls.

"Where is Grace--what has happened?" he asked, quickly.

"This telegram--it came for you to the house--Grace opened it," explained Mollie, briefly.

Mr. Ford seemed to comprehend it at a glance.

"I was afraid of this!" he exclaimed. "Some of those rascally labor contractors will do anything to get help. I will have to go down there, I think. Does Mrs. Ford know?"

"No, I told Grace to keep it from her until you came home."

"That was right. I must make light of this. Then I'll leave for Jacksonville at once. Thank you very much, Betty."

He closed his desk and went out with the girls, calling a carriage for them and himself, as the snow was now falling heavily.

In some way Mr. Ford managed to impart some of the details of the new emergency to his wife without unduly arousing her. He also spoke of the necessity of going to Florida.

"Oh, do you really have to go?" his wife asked, in alarm.

"I think it will be better. Will may do something rash, thinking he is putting through a fine business deal. I don't want him to get into--legal difficulties. It would not look well for my professional reputation," and Mr. Ford forced a laugh to reassure his wife.

Arrangements for going to Jacksonville were soon made, as he was to leave on the midnight train. In the meanwhile he communicated with the telegraph authorities in the South, telling them of his plans, and asking for any additional information.

All that he could learn was that Will had gone to the address given in his first letter--a private boarding house. He had been there a few days, making friends with the landlady, and finally had gone off with a man who bore a shady reputation in the city. Will had said he was going farther into the interior, and the woman thought she heard something about a lumber camp, or a place where turpentine and other pine-tar products, were obtained.

"Well, do the best you can, Grace, until I come back," said Mr. Ford. "And look after your mother. Perhaps this will be all right after all."

There were three weary days of waiting, relieved only by brief messages from Mr. Ford, saying that he was doing all he could to find Will. Mrs. Ford was not told the whole story, save that her son had gone into the interior.

"Oh, I'm sure something must have happened!" exclaimed Grace, when on the fourth day there came a message saying Mr. Ford was on his way back. "He hasn't Will with him, or he would have said so. Oh, isn't it perfectly terrible!"

"Now, don't worry," advised Betty. "I know that is easy to say, Grace, and hard to do. But try. Even if your father hasn't found Will, perhaps he has some trace of him. He would hardly come back without good reason."

"I suppose not. Oh, aren't boys--terrible!"

"But Will didn't mean to cause all this trouble," spoke Mollie.

"I know. But he has, just the same."

Grace was too miserable even to think of chocolates.

Mr. Ford looked pale and tired when he came home, and his eyes showed loss of sleep.

"Well," he said to Grace, who was surrounded by her three chums, "I didn't find Will. He seems to have made a mess of it."

"How?" asked his sister.

"Well, by getting in with this developing concern. It seems that he signed some sort of contract, agreeing to work for them. He supposed it was clerical or secretary's work, but it turns out that he was deceived. What he signed was a contract to work in one of the many camps in the wilds of the interior. He may be getting out cypress, or turpentine."

"Couldn't you locate him, Daddy?" asked Grace.

"No, for the firm he signed with operates many camps. I could get very little satisfaction from them. I may have to appeal to the authorities."

"But Will is not of age--they can't hold him even if he did sign a contract to work, especially when they deceived him," declared Grace.

"I know it, my dear," replied her father. "But they have him in their clutches, and possession, as you know, is nine points of the law, and part of the tenth. Where Will is I don't know. Just as the message said, he went off with that smooth talker, and he seems to have disappeared."

"How--how can you find him?" asked Grace.

"I'm going to have your Uncle Isaac trace him. He knows the South better than I, and can work to better advantage. That is why I came back. Uncle Isaac is in New York City now. I am going to telegraph him to come on here and I'll give him the particulars. Then he can hunt for Will. Poor boy! I guess he wishes now that he'd stayed in the mill."

The news was broken to Mrs. Ford as gently as could be, but it nearly prostrated her. Then Uncle Isaac came, and to his credit be it said that he was kinder than his wont. He seemed really sympathetic and did not once say, "I told you so!"

He readily agreed to search for his nephew, and left for the South as soon as he could finish his business.

"I guess our Florida trip is all off," said Grace with a sigh, one evening.

"Not at all," said her father. "I want you girls to go. It may be that you might hear some word of Will."

"Then we will go!" his sister cried. "Oh! I do hope we can find him."

The preparations for the Florida trip went on. Meanwhile nothing was heard from the missing youth, and Uncle Isaac had no success.

Then, most unexpectedly, there came word from the boy himself--indirect word--but news just the same.

It was in the shape of a letter from a Southern planter, who said one of his hands had picked up the enclosed note in a cotton field near a railroad track. It had probably been tossed from a train window, and had laid some time in the field, being rain-soaked. It bore Mr. Ford's address, and so the planter forwarded it. The note was as follows:

"DEAR DAD: I certainly am in trouble. That development business was a fake, and I have literally been kidnapped, with a lot of other young fellows--some colored. They're taking us away to a turpentine swamp to work. I've tried to escape, but it's no use. I appealed for help to the crowd, as did some of the others, but the contractors declared we were a lot of criminals farmed out by the State. And, as a lot of their workers really are convicts, I had no show. I don't know what to do--help me if you can. I don't know where they're taking us, but if I get a chance I'll send word. I'm scribbling this under my hat in the train, and I'm going to toss it out the window. I hope you get it.

"WILL."



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 shivering 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 Aunt 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.



CHAPTER VIII

LAUNCHING THE BOAT

"Can you smell the orange blossoms?"

"Yes. Aren't they delicious!"

"It reminds me of a wedding--hark, can you hear the strains of Mendelssohn?"

"Those are frogs, Betty," laughed Mollie.

The girls and Mr. and Mrs. Stonington were driving in a big canopy-topped carriage along a Florida road, toward the orange grove on the outskirts of the town of Bentonville. Their journey was over and at last they were in Florida.

"Oh, see the magnolias!" cried Grace, as they passed a tree in full bloom, the fragrance being almost overpowering. "They are just like those the boys sold us when the train stopped."

"Only they smell much sweeter," said Betty.

"Yes, almost too sweet," added Mollie.

Their trip had been practically without incident, and certainly without accident. There had been one or two delays, caused by various small happenings, but finally they had steamed into the junction station, where they took a way train for Bentonville.

This last was a short trip, the one in the compartment car, without change, having been rather monotonous. And yet not dull, for the girls found much to talk about, to speculate upon and to wonder at.

The snow, the cold and biting winds had gradually been left behind, and Nature, coy and uncertain at first, had, with the advance into the South, grown bolder. They had come from the land of bleakness and barrenness--from the place of leafless trees--into the region of Summer, almost in a day and night. They had exchanged snows for flowers.

Mrs. Stonington had stood the trip well, though a trifle weary and worn as the end of the journey came in sight. But the warm and balmy air of the South seemed to revive her, and her cheeks, that had been pale, took on a tinge of color.

"Oh, I am so glad," murmured Amy, and the others were glad with her.

They had delayed at the Bentonville station long enough to make sure that Betty's boat had arrived, and to send home telegrams telling of their safe journey.

They had been met by a man from the orange grove, a kindly Southern worker, whose very nature seemed a protest against haste and worry.

"Well," he greeted them slowly, "I see you all has arrived. Welcome, folks! Now when you're ready we'll move along; but don't be in no rush. It's too pow'ful warm to rush."

Indeed it was warm, and the girls, who had changed to some of their summer garments, felt the truth of this.

"Oh, for a lawn waist and a white skirt, low canvas shoes and a palm leaf fan!" sighed Mollie, as they drove beneath great trees that tempered the heat of the sun.

"Anything else?" asked Betty with a laugh.

"Lemonade," suggested Amy. "Or, no, since we are on an orange plantation I suppose orangeade would be more appropriate, girls."

"Anything as long as it's cool," sighed Grace. "I declare, all my chocolates have run together," and she looked with dismay into a box of the confection she had been carrying.

"No wonder--it's summer, and we left winter behind us," said Betty. "You'll have to give up chocolates down here, Grace, my dear."

"Or else keep them on ice," ventured Amy.

A turn of the road brought them in full view of the orange grove in which Mr. Stonington was interested, and at the sight a murmur of pleased surprise broke from the girls.

"And to think of going out there and picking oranges as one would apples!" exclaimed Amy. "Doesn't it seem odd to see oranges that aren't in a crate, or a fruit store?"

"Some of those will be in crates 'fore night," said the driver. "We're picking every day now. It's a good season, and we're making the most of it," he added to Mr. Stonington.

"Glad to hear it. You'll have to ship them as fast as you can with four orange-hungry girls on hand," and he laughed at Amy and her chums.

"Oh, Uncle Stonington!" Amy cried. "As if we could eat all the oranges here!" and she looked over the rows and rows of fruit-laden trees.

"You ain't no idea how many oranges you can eat, when yo'all get them right off a tree," said the driver. "They taste different from the ones you Northerners have, I tell you!"

One of the foremen, whom Mr. Stonington had met before, came from the grove to welcome them, and to show them the way to the bungalow they were to occupy during their stay in the South.

"We hope you will like it here," said the overseer, a Mr. Hammond.

"I don't see how we could help it," said Mrs. Stonington. "I am in love with the place already, and I feel so much better even with this little taste of Summer."

"That's good!" exclaimed her husband, with shining eyes.

As the carriage stopped in front of a cool-looking bungalow, a "comfortable-looking" colored "mammy" came to the door smiling expansively.

"Bress all yo' hea'ts!" she exclaimed. "Climb right down, and come in yeah! I's got de fried chicken an' corn pone all ready fo' yo'all. An' dere's soft crabs fo' dem as wants 'em, an' chicken-gumbo soup, an'----"

"Hold on, Aunt Hannah!" exclaimed Mr. Hammond with a laugh. "Have a little mercy on them. Maybe they are not hungry for all your good things."

"Oh, aren't we, though!" cried Mollie. "Just try me. I've always wanted chicken fried in the Southern style."

"You'll get it here," said Mr. Stonington.

Let us pass over that first meal--something that the girls did not do by any means--but the mere details of our friends arriving, getting settled, and then of resting to enjoy life as they had never enjoyed it before, can have little of interest to the reader. So, as I said, let us pass over a few days.

Each one, it is true, brought something new and of peculiar interest to the girls, but it was only because they had never before been in Florida. To the residents it was all an old story--even the picking of oranges.

The grove was near a beautiful stream, not such a river as was the Argono of Deepdale, but broader, more shallow and sluggish.

"I wonder if there are alligators in it?" asked Betty, of one of the pickers.

"Not around here," he answered. "You have to go into the bayous, or swamps, for them critters. Don't yo'all worry 'bout the 'gators."

"We won't when we get in the *Gem*," said Betty. "I wonder when they will bring her up and launch her?"

"Let's go to the depot and find out," suggested Amy. "We can have a carriage and team with a driver any time we want it, Uncle Stonington said."

At the freight office the boat was promised to them for the following day, but it was two before this promise was kept.

"You mustn't fret," said Mr. Stonington, when Betty grew rather impatient. "Remember you are down South. Few persons hurry here."

But finally the *Gem* arrived, and after some hard work she was launched. Proudly she rode the river, as proudly as at Deepdale, and Betty, with a little cry of joy, took her place at the wheel.

Batteries and magneto were in place, some gasoline was provided, and a little later the motor boat was ready for her

first trip in Southern waters.

"All aboard!" cried Betty, as the engine was started.

Slowly, but with gathering speed, the trim craft shot out into the middle of the Mayfair.

"Oh, this is just perfect!" breathed Mollie. There was a little cloud on the face of Grace. They all knew what it was, and sympathized with her. No news had come about Will.

They puffed along, to the wonder and admiration of many of the colored pickers, who stopped to look--any excuse was good enough for stopping--especially the sight of a motor boat. Suddenly Grace, who was trailing her hand over the stern, gave a startled cry, and sprang up.

"Oh! oh!" she screamed. "An alligator. I nearly touched the horrid thing! Go ashore, Betty!"

CHAPTER IX

ON A SAND BAR

"Alligators!" screamed Amy. "Don't you dare say that, Grace!"

"But it's so--I saw one--I nearly put my hand on his big black head. Oh, isn't it horrid!"

Grace and Amy were clinging to each other now in the middle of the boat. Betty had turned about at their exclamations, and Mollie was gazing curiously into the swirling water.

"I don't see any alligator," she announced, unbelievably. "Are you sure you saw one, Grace?"

"Of course I am. Oh, Betty! There's one now, just ahead of you. You're going to run into him!"

Betty turned her attention to guiding the boat only just in time. Certainly something long and knobby and black was almost at the bow. She veered to one side, and then exclaimed:

"Alligator! That was nothing but a log, Grace Ford! How silly of you!"

"Silly? Nothing of the sort. I tell you I did see an alligator."

"It was a log--but it does look like one of the big creatures, though," said Amy. "Oh, if it should have been one!"

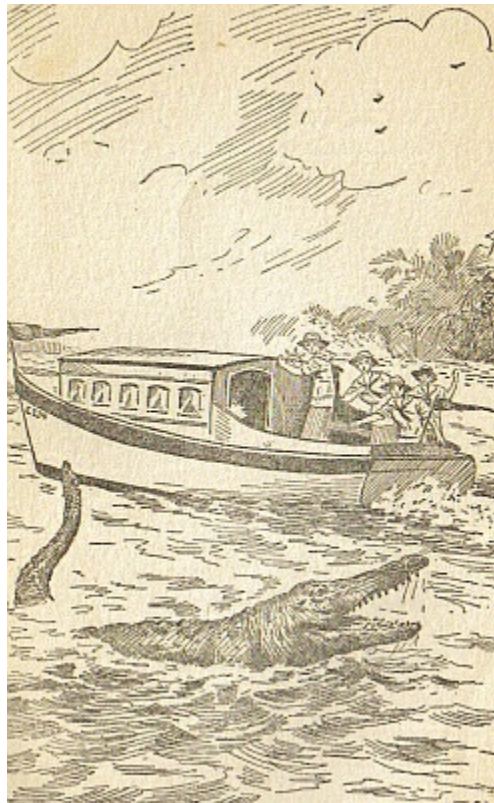
"Well, it couldn't eat us--here in the boat," said Mollie.

"No, but it might have capsized us, and then--" Grace paused suggestively.

"All's well that ends well," quoted Betty, as she turned the boat nearer shore. "Some day we must take our lunch, and have a picnic ashore. See the lovely Spanish moss hanging down from the trees. It's like living history over again. Just think of it, how Balboa came here and discovered the land, and----"

"It wasn't Balboa, it was Ponce de Leon who located Florida," corrected Mollie. "Don't you remember--Flowery Easter?"

"Oh, so it was. Well, anyhow----"



"THERE! THERE!" SCREAMED GRACE.

"There--there!" screamed Grace. "There's an alligator, surely. It's alive, too! Oh, dear! An alligator!"

She pointed to something long and dark floating in the river--something that seemed to be covered with scales and ridges--something that suddenly turned up an ugly head, with bulging eyes, which looked fishily at the girls in the boat.

Then, with a swirl of its tail, the creature sank below the surface.

"Yes, that was an alligator," said Betty quietly.

"I told you it was," spoke Grace. "And to think I nearly had my hand on it. Oh, I don't want to remember it."

"But it didn't bite you," said practical Mollie.

"If it had--well, the less said the better," remarked Betty. "Now let's forget all about it and enjoy ourselves. Maybe there are only a few of them here in the river."

"I wonder what alligators are good for, anyhow?" came from Amy, as she resumed her seat. "They don't seem fit for anything."

"You forget about alligator bags," corrected Mollie. "What would we do for valises and satchels if we had no alligators, I'd like to know?"

"That's so," admitted Amy.

Grace was looking over the surface of the river as though to see if any more of the ugly creatures were in sight, but the water was unruffled save by the wind.

Not knowing the character of the stream Betty did not want to venture to far. So, after going down about a mile or so, she turned the boat and headed up stream. They passed a number of small boats, manned by colored boys who were fishing, and the youngsters suspended operations to gaze with mingled wonder and fear at Betty's swiftly-moving craft.

They tied up at the small dock which extended out into the river at the foot of the orange grove, well satisfied with their first trip, even though they had been frightened by the alligators.

"Yes, you will find one or two 'gators, now and then," said Mr. Hammond, the overseer, when told of the girls' experience. "But they won't bother you, especially in a big boat. Don't worry."

But Grace was so nervous that night that she did not sleep well, and Mrs. Stonington grew quite alarmed. Perhaps it was as much worry over the fate of Will, as the recollection of her escape from the alligator, that disturbed Grace.

For no good news had come from Mr. Ford. He had set many influences at work on the case, but so far nothing had come of his inquiries.

Will seemed to have been taken into the interior of Florida, and there lost. There were so many turpentine camps, or places where contract labor was used to get out valuable wood, or other products, that a complete inquiry would take a long time.

Mrs. Ford was as well as could be expected, Grace's father wrote, though naturally very much worried. And Grace was worried too. If she could have engaged actively in a search for her brother perhaps she might not have fretted so. But it was harassing to sit idly by and let others do the work.

"Especially when we have already done so much," said Betty, agreeing with her chum's view of the case.

Watching the work of gathering oranges, occasionally themselves helping somewhat, taking walks, drives and trips in the motor boat, made time for the girls pass quickly.

Then, one day, Betty said:

"Girls, we must go on a picnic. Take our lunch and go down the river in the boat. Go ashore and eat. We will do some exploring."

"And perhaps find the fountain of youth that Ponce de Leon missed," added Mollie.

"If you find it, bring some of the water back," begged Mr. Stonington. "You girls will not need it--I do."

"We'll bottle some for you," promised Amy, laughing.

Soon they were off in the *Gem* again, Grace, at least, keeping a wary eye out for alligators. But they saw none of the unprepossessing creatures.

"Though perhaps we may meet with a sea-cow," suggested Betty, as she looked for a pleasant place whereon to go ashore for lunch.

"What's a sea-cow?" asked Mollie.

"One that eats sea-weed," cried Amy.

"No, I mean a manatee," went on Betty. "Don't you remember the big creatures we saw in the New York aquarium a year or so ago?"

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Amy. "Well, they're not as bad as alligators--at least they haven't such large mouths."

"And they only eat--grass," added Mollie.

Betty was sending her boat ahead at good speed, scanning the shores of the river for some quiet cove into which to steer. The day was warm, and the sun shone down unclouded. From the banks came the odor of flowers.

Suddenly, as the boat chugged along, there came a momentary halt, as though it had struck something.

"What's that?" cried Grace.

"Maybe an alligator has us," suggested Mollie with a laugh. For the *Gem* went on as though nothing had happened.

"Don't be silly!" chided Grace. "It was certainly something."

Betty looked back a bit nervously, and glanced at the engine.

"I hope the gasoline isn't giving out," she murmured.

"The idea!" cried Grace.

Then with a shock that threw all the girls forward in their seats the *Gem* came to a sudden halt, and the engine raced furiously. Betty at once shut off the power.

"Oh, oh!" cried Grace. "What is it? Has an alligator got hold of us?"

Betty looked over the bow. Then she said grimly:

"We've run on a sand bar--that's all. Run on it good and hard, too. I wonder if we can get off?"



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 flirited 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.

CHAPTER XI

INTO THE INTERIOR

"Oh, dear!" cried Grace, as she shrank back against Betty. "Oh, dear."

"Those--those men," breathed Amy, who also seemed to be looking about for some sort of physical support. "See, Betty!"

They both seemed to depend on the "Little Captain" in this emergency. As for Mollie, her dark eyes flashed, and she looked at Betty with a nod of encouragement. Whatever happened, these two would stand together, at any rate.

"Don't be silly!" exclaimed Betty, stilling the wild beating of her own heart by the reflection that she must be brave for the sake of others.

"But they are coming right toward us!" gasped Grace, making a move as though to hide in the cabin.

"Of course they are!" exclaimed Mollie, quickly. "They are going to help us; aren't they, Betty?"

"I'm sure I hope so," was the low-voiced answer. "One thing, girls, speak very carefully. Sound carries very distinctly over water, you know."

"They are coming toward us," added Amy, shrinking closer to Betty. There was no doubt of that. The eyes of all in the approaching motor boat, which was a powerful craft, were fixed on the girls in the *Gem*, and it was a strange sight to see the eyes of the colored men, with so much of the white showing in contrast to their dark faces, staring fixedly at our friends. Grace caught herself in a half-hysterical laugh.

"They looked just like those queer china dolls," she explained afterward.

The white man steering the boat was almost as dark in complexion as were his companions, but at least he was white--the girls were sure of that.

"I guess they know we have run on a sand bar," Betty explained, in as calm a voice as she could bring to her need. "They are avoiding it themselves."

As she spoke the other boat made a wide sweep and then, having gone down past the *Gem*, it again swept in on a curve, now being headed up stream.

"Stuck?" called the white steersman, and his voice was not unpleasant, though a bit domineering, Betty thought.

"But perhaps this is because he is used to giving orders," she reflected.

"Yes; we are on a sand bar, I'm afraid," she answered, and smiled.

"Look natural!" she commanded to the others a moment later, her voice not reaching the men in the other craft, she felt sure, for the clutch of the relief boat had been thrown out and the engine was racing, making considerable noise. "Look as though we expected this," Betty commanded. "There's nothing to fear. We are not far from home."

"Lots of folks get stuck on that bar," went on the man, who was bringing his boat into a position favorable for giving aid to the *Gem*. "It ought to be buoyed, or marked in some way. You're strangers around here, I take it," he went on.

"Yes, from Mr. Stonington's orange grove," said Betty, simply. "If you will kindly pull us off this bar we will gladly pay you for your trouble."

Was it fancy, or did Betty detect fierce and eager gleams in the eyes of the colored men?

"Oh, shucks!" exclaimed the steersman, quickly. "I've pulled lots of bigger boats than yours off that bar. And not for pay, neither. Can you catch a rope?"

"Oh, yes," said Mollie, quickly, determined to second Betty's efforts to appear at ease. "We've done considerable cruising."

"That's good. Well, you want to know this river before you do much more. It's treacherous. Sam, throw that rope while I put us up a little closer," he commanded.

"Yes, boss," was the reply of a big colored man in the bow.

Both Mollie and Betty grasped for the rope as it came uncoiling toward them.

"That's good," complimented the man. "Now can you make it fast? Have you a ring-bolt there?"

"No, but there's a deck-cleat," spoke Betty.

"Just the same. Now, then, I'm going to turn about and try to haul you off, pointing my bow down stream. This boat works better on the direct clutch than in reverse. And when I start to pull, you'd better reverse your motor. Can you do it?"

"Oh, yes," answered Betty.

"Good. You do know something about boats. So you're from the orange grove; eh? I heard the new owner had come on. Need any men down there?" and he seemed quite business-like.

"I--I don't know," faltered Betty, looking at Amy. "Mr. Stonington hasn't told us anything about that. This is his niece," and she nodded at Amy.

"Oh, is that so! Well, if he should happen to need any pickers, I can supply him. Hank Belton is my name. I supply laborers for lots of orange growers and others. I'm the biggest dealer in labor around here; ain't I, boys?" and he appealed to the colored men.

"Dat's what you am, boss!" exclaimed one, with a chuckle.

"And I always treats my help right, no matter what happens after they hire out; don't I, boys?"

"Suah!" came in a chorus.

"So just remind Mr. Stonington about me," the man went on with what he evidently meant for a friendly smile, but which made the girls shudder. "My place is at Penbrook--about ten miles up the river. Now, then, have you that rope fast?"

"Yes," answered Betty.

"Get ready then--I'm going to pull you. And start your motor as soon as the tow rope gets taut!"

"All right," answered Betty in business-like tones.

The tow rope straightened out as the other motor boat started down stream. Betty watched, and, when she thought the proper time had come, she started her motor on the reverse.

For a moment it seemed that, even with this, the *Gem* would not come off the bar, and the girls looked anxiously over the side to detect the first motion.

Then there came a quiver to the stranded boat, and a shout from the colored men:

"She's movin', boss!"

"Turn on a little more gas!" cried the steersman to Betty. "I think we have her now!"

She speeded up her motor, and in another instant the *Gem* came free so suddenly that there was danger of a collision.

"Shut down!" called Hank Belton quickly. "You're all right now."

Betty turned off the power, and Mollie cast loose the tow rope.

"Thank you very much," she called to the man.

"I wish you would let us pay you," added Betty.

"Nary a pay, Miss," was his answer. "I'm glad I could help you. Just give my message to Mr. Stonington, and I'll be obliged to you. Better back down a bit before you turn. That bar sticks out a ways. It's a wonder you didn't hit it before. You can't draw much."

"We don't!" answered Betty.

The other boat was proceeding down stream now, the colored men looking back with their rolling eyes. Betty started

her engine on the reverse again, and then, feeling sure that they were beyond the bar, she turned and steered her craft back toward the orange grove. The picnic plan was given up now as it was getting late and the girls were tired.

"Thank goodness that's over!" exclaimed Grace, with a sigh of relief. "Oh, I was so frightened!"

"At what?" asked Mollie.

"I--I don't know."

"Well, it was very kind of them," said Betty. "We might have had to stay there a long time."

"And I'm going to tell Uncle Stonington," spoke Amy. "He may want to hire men, for there are many more oranges to pick."

Grace sat thoughtfully on the cushions, neglecting even to eat her chocolates.

"A penny for your thoughts," offered Betty.

"I was just wondering," said Grace slowly, "that perhaps that man might know something of the labor contractor who has Will in the toils. I wish I had thought to ask."

"That's so!" cried Mollie. "But we can find him again. It will give us something to do, Betty. We can come up the river again."

"And I'll be sure to keep away from that sand bar," declared the Little Captain.

Mr. and Mrs. Stonington were quite alarmed when the girls told of their adventure.

"They weren't in any real danger," declared Mr. Hammond, the overseer. "The river isn't deep nor swift, and there are boats going up and down quite often."

"But what about those rough men?" asked Mrs. Stonington.

"Oh, rough is the worst thing you can say against them. They aren't really bad. Belton has the best supply of laborers around here. Probably he was taking those men down to Hanson's grove. We will need pickers ourselves next week, Mr. Stonington, and I don't believe we can do any better than to get them from Belton."

"Very well, Mr. Hammond; whatever you say."

"And that will be a chance to repay him for his kindness to us," added Betty.

"And perhaps we can get some news of my brother," spoke Grace, wistfully, for there had come no word from those who were searching for the missing youth.

"I'd like to go and ask myself," went on Grace.

"Well, there's no reason why you shouldn't," said Mr. Hammond. "I'll be going up the river in a day or so, and if you think we'll hire of Belton I'll tell him so," he said to Mr. Stonington.

"Yes, if you like, Mr. Hammond."

"All right, then I'll pilot the girls to his camp if their boat will hold me."

"Indeed it will!" exclaimed Betty, "and you can tell me how to avoid sand bars."

"Belton's place is a little way into the interior from the river," went on Mr. Hammond, "but it's a safe road."

"Then we'll go," decided Betty.

The next few days were filled with small incidents of little interest. The girls motored about, and did some fishing in the river, catching a variety of specimens, few of which were pronounced fit for the table. But they enjoyed themselves very much.

They wandered about in the orange grove, eating as much of the delicious fruit as they chose. Sometimes they took walks with Mrs. Stonington, who was slowly regaining her health. Mr. Stonington was kept busy seeing to the details of the business, that was new to him.

One night Mr. Hammond said:

"I think we'll need those pickers to-morrow, or next day, Mr. Stonington."

"Very well, then get them. The girls can take you up to Belton's camp."

"And perhaps I can get some word of Will," observed Grace hopefully.

The trip up the river was devoid of incident, except that Betty nearly ran on another sand bar, being warned just in time by Mr. Hammond. Then they reached the landing where Belton's boat was moored.

"That shows he's in camp," said the foreman, as he helped the girls tie the *Gem*. Then they struck off into the interior, not a few doubts tugging at the girls' hearts. It was very wild and desolate, the Everglades being not far distant.



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.



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!"



CHAPTER XIV

THE TATTERED YOUTH

Betty Nelson reached the bank of the river and stopped. She could go no farther for the muddy water stretched itself at her feet. But her boat--the trim little *Gem*--was moving slowly up the stream under the influence of the mysterious something that was towing it away from the girls.

"Oh!" cried Grace. "What can we do? Betty--Mollie! We must stop it."

"Yes; but how?" asked Mollie. She and the others had followed Betty to the shore.

"We must find another boat, and catch the *Gem*!" cried Amy. "It isn't going very fast."

"If we only could!" murmured Betty, looking helplessly around. But no other boat was in sight. "We must do something," she went on. "We'll be marooned if we stay here!"

"But what can be towing our boat?" asked Mollie. She stood on the bank, nervously twining her fingers in and out, weaving them back and forth as she always did when puzzled or alarmed. "Is it the current taking it away, Betty?"

"But it's going against the current," Grace pointed out. "Some animal must have become entangled in the anchor or painter, Betty. An alligator, perhaps."

"That's it!" cried Mollie. "An alligator is running away with our boat. Oh, Betty!"

"It may be that," admitted the Little Captain, as she gazed after her craft. "I didn't think of it, but that's probably what it is. I don't see the beast above the water, though. Do you, girls?"

There was nothing visible except part of the anchor rope that extended from the ring-bolt in the forward deck, over the stem and slanting down into the water.

"The alligator may be swimming just below the surface," was Mollie's opinion. "He may come up pretty soon, and we can throw stones at it. That's it, Betty. We must stone the creature and make it let go. Come on!"

Betty laughed. The others looked at Mollie curiously.

"She--she's hysterical," murmured Grace.

"I am not!" protested Mollie indignantly.

"But the idea of throwing stones at an alligator!" cried Grace. "Why, its hide will turn a bullet!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Amy blankly. "Then what can we do? We have no bullets!"

"It isn't going very fast," observed Mollie as she watched the boat moving slowly up the river. "We can run along the bank after it, and maybe the beast will let go, or run ashore with the *Gem*. Then we could get it."

"Who--the boat or the alligator?" asked Betty, who seemed to be in better spirits now, even in the face of trouble.

"The boat, of course."

"Then speak of the *Gem* as 'her' and the alligator as 'it,'" Betty directed. "But I believe Mollie's plan is the only one we can adopt. We must follow along the bank. Only I hope, if the alligator does let go, it won't be in the middle of the river, for then our boat would float down, and it might lodge on the other shore. Then we would be as badly off as we are now. Oh, what a predicament! We seem to be getting into nothing but trouble of late."

"Never mind," consoled Amy. "Maybe this will be the last."

"It's a comfort to think so, anyhow," agreed Grace. "I wonder why an alligator ran off with our boat?"

"A mere accident," was Betty's opinion. "Probably the creature was swimming along shore, and became entangled in our anchor rope. It may be as much frightened as we are distressed. But come on, if we're going to try to get the boat."

Stumbling over the uneven way, the girls raced along the river bank. Sometimes the boat appeared to be coming close in shore, and again it would veer out.

"I've just thought of something!" exclaimed Amy as they came up nearly opposite the boat, for it was being towed more slowly now, as though the creature having it in charge found it harder work.

"Then do, for goodness sake, tell us what it is," demanded Mollie. "I'm about played out."

"If we threw stones on the other side of the alligator--I mean across, between him and the other shore--it might scare him over this way."

"Oh!" screamed Grace. "Don't you dare scare him over here!"

"I didn't mean right here," went on Amy. "I only meant farther in toward this shore. Then he might run aground and we could wade out and get the boat."

"Wade in the water that has an alligator in it!" cried Grace with a shudder. "Never!"

"Well, it might be a good plan to try," spoke Betty. "I see what Amy means. When we were little, and used to play with toy boats, if one went out too far we used to throw stones in the water beyond it, and the waves would sometimes send it ashore. Now, if we did that, the alligator might think someone on the other bank was throwing things at him, and he would come over here. It's worth trying."

"I am certain I can't throw straight," complained Grace.

"Oh, well, this isn't a ball game," said Mollie. "Any sort of throwing will do for an alligator. Come on, now, all together."

In spite of her protest, Grace managed to do fairly at the stone-throwing. In fact the outdoor girls were what their name implied--they could do many things that outdoor boys could do, and throwing stones was one of their accomplishments. They had not played basket ball for nothing.

A shower of missiles fell into the water on the far side of whatever creature was towing the *Gem*. For a few minutes no effect was produced, and then the creature under water did seem to veer over toward the shore where the girls were slowly walking along.

"Gracious! If he really comes here!" cried Grace, getting ready to beat a retreat.

"I'm afraid there's not much danger," spoke Betty, in a low tone. "He seems too fond of our boat."

"Throw more stones!" directed Mollie, and another shower of small rocks sailed through the air to fall with many splashes into the turbid water.

There was a swirl in the river just in front of the *Gem*, as though the creature towing it objected to the treatment it was receiving. And then, as the girls, anxiously watching, prepared to send another volley of stones, Amy uttered a cry, and pointed up the river toward a small point of land that jutted out into the stream.

"Look!" she cried. "A man in a boat!"

They all gazed to where she indicated, and beheld not a man, but a ragged youth standing up in a broad bottomed scow, poling himself down stream. He was headed directly for the *Gem*.

"Oh, he is just in time!" cried Mollie. "He'll get our boat for us!"

"Call to him!" directed Grace. "I'm so nervous that I can't speak above a whisper."

Mollie raised her voice in an appeal for help.

"Hello, there!" she called. "Our boat! Right in front of you! Can you get it? Scare away the alligator! It's towing our boat off! Please get it!"

The ragged youth looked up, startled, and glanced from the boat, seemingly moving up stream without any visible propelling agency, to the four girls on the shore. He seemed much surprised, and acted, as Betty said afterward, as though he would like to run away. She called to him:

"Look out for the alligator! Don't get into danger!"

The ragged youth now seemed to comprehend what was wanted of him. He poled his clumsy craft toward the *Gem* and peered down into the water to see what manner of creature was at the other end of the anchor rope. Then he waved his pole at the girls, as though to reassure them, and edged nearer the motor boat.

"All right!" he called, in a quick, nervous manner. "I see him. I'll get him for you."

"Gracious--I wonder if he means the boat or the alligator?" said Mollie. "I hope he understands that we don't want both--only the boat."

"Oh, he'll know," declared Betty. She was eagerly watching the actions of the ragged youth in the scow.

Suddenly he drew something from his pocket and held it close to the water, leaning over the edge of his craft.

There was a puff of smoke, a flash of fire, and a report that sounded very loudly to the girls.

"Oh!" cried Grace, covering her ears with her hands.

"Be quiet, silly!" exclaimed Betty. "It was the only thing he could do. He shot at the alligator."

Again the revolver of the ragged youth sounded loudly and, a little cloud of smoke floated over his boat. Then he shouted:

"I hit him! I hit him!"

He was seen to reach over with his pole, and fish for something in the water.

"I hope he isn't going to bring it ashore--the alligator, I mean!" cried Mollie. "We want the boat. Get the boat!" she called to the ragged youth.



CHAPTER XV

THE TWO MEN

The girls need have had no fears. The youth in the boat seemed to know what he was doing. He was pulling up the anchor rope now, and a moment later he had the grapple in his scow. Then he let his craft slip down stream until he was below the *Gem* and in a position to tow it.

As he did this there was a swirl in the water just above him, and a queerly-shaped body half arose, falling back with a splash.

The girls had a glimpse of something like a seal, with a queer head, not unlike that of a small hippopotamus.

"Look!" cried Mollie. "That was no alligator! What in the world is it?"

"That's a manatee--a sea-cow, some folks call 'em!" answered the ragged youth, as he poled his boat toward them, towing the *Gem*. "They're harmless, but I had to shoot this one to make him let go. I didn't hurt him much. I never see one so far inland as this, though. I'll have your boat there in a minute."

"Don't hurry," said Betty kindly. "As long as she's safe we are all right. It's awfully kind of you to get her for us. We thought an alligator had her."

"It was rather queer," said the ragged youth. "I never see a boat towed by a manatee before. I'll be ashore in a minute."

He was poling his scow over toward the girls, towing their boat in, aided by the current. A little later he had leaped ashore with the rope, pulling the anchor after him.

"We're a thousand times obliged to you!" exclaimed Mollie, impulsively. "We never should have known what to do without our boat. We're from Bentonville."

"Yes? That's quite a ways down." The youth, in spite of his rags, had a good-looking face and a pleasant manner. He seemed restless and afraid, and was constantly glancing about him, as though in fear of seeing someone or something he did not care to encounter.

"Would you--I mean, can we do anything for you?" half stammered Betty. She wanted to offer him money, but she did not quite know how he would accept it. "If you are going down stream," she went on, "we could take you as far as we are going. If you would come with us, perhaps----"

"Oh, no, I couldn't think of it!" the youth cried--cried out in very fear, it seemed to Mollie, who was observing him narrowly. "I must go on--go on alone. I am going for help!"

"For help!" exclaimed Betty. "What is the trouble? Perhaps we can help you. We are from Mr. Stonington's orange grove, and if we told him you needed help----"

"No, no!" interrupted the youth, glancing about him nervously. "It isn't that kind of help. I am trying to help someone else. I--I can't tell you. But I must be getting on. And will you do me a favor?" he asked suddenly.

"Of course!" cried Betty. "We will be only too glad to, since you did so much for us. Only for you our boat might be far up the river now. What can we do for you?"

"Don't tell anyone you saw me," begged the youth, earnestly. "There are those who would stop me--take me back where I came from. They are after me--they may be below me, trying to head me off. If you meet them--meet any rough-looking men who ask for me--don't tell them about me. Don't set them after me, please."

"You may be sure we will not!" exclaimed Betty, warmly. "Are you from----"

"Please don't ask me!" he exclaimed. "It is so much easier to throw them off the trail if you really know nothing. So don't question me."

"Very well, we won't. But if you are escaping, perhaps you need money----"

"No, I have some, thank you," and he showed a small roll of bills. "He gave it to me," and he seemed to indicate, by a nod, someone farther up the stream.

"Then do you think you will be all right?" asked Mollie. Amy and Grace had taken no part in the talk. They seemed

to be content to look at the strange youth who had rendered the outdoor girls such a service.

"Oh, yes, I'll be all right," was the answer, but the ragged youth looked about him apprehensively. "I must be getting on now, after help--for him. Don't say you saw me--don't tell them anything about me."

"We won't," promised Betty. "You may rely on us."

"Thank you--good-bye!" He stepped into his skiff and quickly poled out from shore, dropping down with the current. The girls gazed after him for a moment. Strangely had he come into their lives, and as strangely gone out, without revealing his identity. And he had done them such a service, too.

"Well, we have our boat back," remarked Betty, with a sigh of thankfulness. "I wonder what possessed that sea cow to swim off with it?"

"Probably it was only an accident," said Mollie. "Well, we certainly have had a day of it. Now let's get back before anything else happens. Gracious, how swiftly he is poling along!"

She pointed to the youth, who was almost out of sight at a bend in the river.

"He wants to get away from those who are after him," observed Grace. "I wonder if he is a desperate criminal?"

"He didn't look at all like a criminal," spoke Amy. "I think he had a nice face."

"He wasn't bad looking," admitted Betty. "Poor fellow, he was very nervous, though."

"And no wonder--meeting four girls at once!" laughed Mollie.

"What shall we do if we meet those men who are after him?" asked Grace. "I shall be so frightened!"

"We won't meet them!" declared Betty. "If we do we need not speak to them. But if they insist we can say truthfully that we don't know who that young fellow was, nor where he went."

"He's out of sight now, at all events," spoke Amy. "I wonder whom he is going to get help for? I wish he had told us more."

"I don't," answered Betty, promptly. "The less we know the less we can tell if any men question us. Now let's get aboard and get back. No more manatees for me!"

The *Gem* was none the worse for her queer tow, and soon, with the girls aboard, was dropping down stream again. The strange youth was not in sight, even when the turn of the river was made, but he may have poled off into one of the many little bayous, or tributary streams, that joined the main one.

"I'm glad he's out of sight," murmured Grace. "If those men should come after him----"

She stopped suddenly, and stared ahead. There, coming around a turn in the river, was a small motor boat containing two men, who, at the sight of the *Gem*, headed directly for her, at the same time indicating by gestures that they wished to speak to those aboard.



CHAPTER XVI

SUSPICIOUS CHARACTERS

"What shall we do?" whispered Grace, glancing at Betty, who stood at the wheel, seemingly as calm and unperturbed as though she had the *Gem* out for a little run on Rainbow Lake. "Oh, what shall we do?"

"Do?" echoed Mollie. "Wait until there's something to be done, of course."

"But those men--they are heading right for us, and we don't know them!"

"And we didn't know Mr. Belton when he came to our rescue," replied Mollie. "So that doesn't count."

"But neither of these men is Mr. Belton," went on Grace. "Oh, I don't like Florida as much as I thought I would!"

"I'm sorry," spoke Amy gently.

"I--I didn't mean just that, my dear," answered Grace impulsively. "But they are heading for us, Betty."

"Of course they are," said the Little Captain.

"But that doesn't mean I am going to stop for them."

"Betty Nelson! Do you mean that you aren't going to stop?" gasped Grace.

"That's what I do mean. I don't see why we should halt our boat just because two strange men signal us. Indeed I'm not going to!" and Betty turned on more power. She gazed straight ahead as though she did not see the men in the approaching craft, who were now wildly waving their hands, and turning their rather disreputable-looking craft in the direction of the *Gem*.

"Betty Nelson! You're just splendid!" cried Grace impulsively as she moved forward and threw her arms about her chum. "I wish I had your courage!"

"Don't hug me too tightly," begged Betty with a laugh. "I may have to steer out of their way."

Indeed it did seem so, for the other craft was coming about so as to almost cross the bows of the boat of the outdoor girls. Then one of the men called:

"I say, young ladies, will you stop a minute? We want to speak to you."

Betty never turned her head, but gazed on down the river as though intent on not grounding on a sand bar, or running into an alligator. Her chums followed her example, but Grace could not forbear giving the men one glance.

"They're talking together," she reported in a low voice.

"Let 'em talk--as long as they don't talk to us," answered Mollie.

The men seemed to have decided on something after a conference, for the one who had first hailed the girls now called again:

"I say, young ladies, we don't mean to be impolite or to bother you, but we're looking for a boat, and----"

"This boat isn't for sale," said Betty in non-committal tones. "We have no time to stop."

"But you don't understand," cried the man, seemingly growing desperate. "One of our boats was taken last night by a young fellow, and he came down the river. We followed him, but we must have passed him in the night. Now we're on our way back. He may have hid in some bayou, and be on his way down farther up stream. All we wanted to know was if you had seen a tall young fellow, with blue eyes, in a small skiff?"

Betty returned no answer. It was not a question, strictly speaking. The men had merely said they wanted to know, and Betty saw no reason for gratifying their "want."

"Hey, can't you stop and answer a civil question?" cried the second man, and his voice was angry. "If you don't we may----"

Betty's cheeks flushed. Without turning her head she answered:

"You'd better be careful how you make threats. We are from Mr. Stonington's orange grove, and Mr. Hammond----"

"There, I knew you'd make a mess of it, Bill!" said the other man--the one who had first spoken--and he turned accusingly to his companion.

"Well, I don't care--why don't they answer? I'll wager they've seen that fellow and won't tell."

"Why shouldn't they tell?" asked the first man in a low voice, but he forgot how well even low tones carry over the water. "They are strangers here I am certain. They can't know 'The Loon,' and so we're perfectly safe in questionin' 'em."

"Yes, but they won't answer. Git over closer and maybe we can make 'em!"

"Oh!" gasped Grace, startled.

"They'd better not try!" cried Mollie with a sparkle in her eyes. "We're not very far from home, and this boat can go twice as fast as theirs."

"Don't be alarmed," said Betty. "I've got some speed in reserve yet."

The men consulted together again. They had put their boat about now, and were coming down after the *Gem*. But it was easy to see they had no speed.

"I say!" called out the man who had first hailed. "Won't you tell us if you've seen a ragged lad in a boat? We don't mean any harm. Just stop a minute!"

"We have no time!" said Betty sharply, "and if you persist in following us----"

"Say, look here!" blustered the second man, "if you gals don't----"

"Now let up on that line, Bill!" cautioned the other. "We don't mean any harm," he proceeded. "My friend here is a bit rough----"

"I'm no rougher than you!" retorted his companion.

"We're willing to pay for the information," went on the first man. "It won't take but a minute----"

But Betty stayed to hear no more. She opened wide the throttle of her motor, and the *Gem* shot ahead, leaving the other craft far behind. There was some evidence in the quicker staccato exhaust of the pursuing boat that the occupants tried to get more speed out of her, but they failed, and a little later Amy, turning around, saw them circling back up stream.

One man stood up and shook his fist vindictively at the girls. Grace gasped as she saw this.

"Oh, I am sure they mean us some harm!" she cried.

"Nonsense!" asserted Betty. "We're far enough off now."

"But if we come out again?" Amy suggested.

"I think we will take one of the young men from the orange crate factory," suggested Mollie. "Mr. Hammond will spare us one, I'm sure, and it would be too bad if we had to give up our trips on the river just because some men are hunting a fugitive."

"And I wonder what they want of him?" asked Grace. "He seemed harmless enough."

"They said he had their boat," supplied Amy.

"Yes, that was probably to escape in," suggested Grace. "He was going for help for someone. Maybe a friend of his was hurt. I wish someone could take help to my brother. Oh, it's dreadful to think he may be in need of it, and that we are unable to get to him."

"It certainly is," agreed Betty. "But fretting will do no good. We may have news of him any time now."

A little later the girls tied up at the orange grove dock. They made light of their adventures, even the one with the sea cow, and did not mention the ragged youth at all, except to say a stranger had recovered their boat for them.

"For there is no need of telling too many persons that we saw him," said Betty later. "Some of the hands might hear of it and, without meaning to, betray his secret."

"But we don't know where he went," said Grace.

"No, and I don't want to--then we can't tell under any circumstances. We'll just keep quiet about it."

For a day or so the girls did not venture far from the bungalow on the river, but soon they tired of comparative inactivity and planned a little cruise, down stream this time, past Lake Chad, and up another river that emptied into it.

"But you'd better take one of my young helpers along," suggested Mr. Hammond, when the girls made known their plan. "There have been a couple of suspicious characters hanging around of late, and I don't want you to take any chances. I'll give you a young fellow you can depend on."



CHAPTER XVII

IN DANGER

The girls looked at one another on hearing Mr. Hammond's warning. The same thought was in the mind of each.

"What--what kind of suspicious characters were they?" asked Betty.

"Oh, just the usual kind," replied the overseer. "I don't want to alarm you, and you needn't be afraid. They're mostly a cowardly set that always congregate around where a lot of work is going on, hoping to get money without labor, either by some form of chance game, or by deliberately taking advantage of some of the simple-minded colored hands. I ordered these two away a couple of times, and I'll do more than that the next time I see 'em."

"Did they--did they come in a motor boat?" faltered Mollie.

"I didn't notice. But they weren't the kind of fellows I want hanging around here, especially when pay-day comes. But don't think any more of what I said. I'm going to give you a young fellow to accompany you. He knows the river and the region around like a book, and anyone who tries to bother you when you're out he'll make short work of. He's a sort of deputy constable."

"Why do you think--I mean, in what way do you think anyone might try to bother us?" asked Betty.

"Oh, various ways. They might try to sell you a lot of useless trinkets, knowing you're from the North. Fancy shells, sea beans, curios and the like of that. You see, there isn't much ready money floating around among the poor people here. Even some of the scattered Seminoles--or what were once Seminole Indians--try to make a living selling trinkets they make themselves, and if they thought you had money they would become annoying. But Tom Osborne will see to 'em, all right. He knows a lot of 'em. When are you going?"

"Oh, in about an hour," answered Grace. "We're going to take our lunch and stay all day."

"That will suit Tom fine. He's very fond of--lunch!" and Mr. Hammond laughed.

"Doesn't he like--girls?" asked Mollie, with a blush.

"You can tell that better than I after you've met him. He's one of my bookkeepers, and a fine young fellow. I'll send him along to you."

"But maybe we ought not to take him from his work," suggested Betty, feeling that perhaps Mr. Stonington would not like the operation of his orange business interfered with by the pleasure of herself and her friends.

"Oh, I'll make it all right with uncle," laughed Amy. "We must enjoy ourselves while we're here."

"You needn't worry," spoke Mr. Hammond with a laugh. "Tom will be glad to come, and the worst of the rush is over now. Just consider him your escort, and he'll do anything you want, from catching an alligator to getting your meals. He's a handy young fellow, Tom is, and he knows all the streams about here."

While the overseer was gone to summon the young man, the girls prepared for the little outing. They had put up a lunch, or, rather, Aunt Hannah, the genial colored "mammy" had done it for them, putting in plenty of fried chicken and corn bread.

"Perhaps we'd better have more," suggested Mollie, to Aunt Hannah, when the fact of Tom Osborne going along was mentioned.

"Bress yo' he'at, honey!" exclaimed the buxom cook, "I done put in enough fo' two mo' gen'men if yo'all would laik t' take 'em along. Don't yo'all worry!"

"No, I think one young man will be sufficient," laughed Betty. "Only I didn't want him to go hungry, and I know the appetites of my friends."

"Speak for yourself, if you please!" chided Mollie. "You eat as much as any of us."

"I wonder if those two suspicious characters Mr. Hammond spoke of could be the ones who followed us in the boat?" asked Amy, to change the subject.

"They *could* have been," remarked Grace, "but I wouldn't want to think so."

"Why not?" asked Mollie.

"Because it would show that they were still following us."

"Perhaps it was unwise that I told them where we were from," said Betty, "but I did it for the best. I didn't want them to think that we had no friends near at hand."

"Of course," rejoined Amy. "You meant it all right. And they may not have been the same ones at all. Mr. Hammond did not say they made inquiries for us, or for that poor young fellow. What was it they called him--'The Duck?'"

"'Loon--loon!'" corrected Betty, with a laugh.

"Well, I knew it was some kind of a bird," asserted Amy. "I wonder why they called him that?"

"A loon is supposed to be a crazy sort of a bird," went on Betty, "and, come to think of it, that poor chap didn't look very bright. Maybe he was half-witted, and that's why they called him The Loon."

"Well, he knew enough to shoot the manatee, and get our boat for us," defended Grace. "I don't think he was very stupid."

"Oh, I don't mean it that way," said Betty quickly. "I only suggested that perhaps those mean men--I'm sure they were mean--might have called him that to suit their own purposes. But I think we are well rid of them, anyhow. Here comes Mr. Hammond, and that must be Tom with him," and she indicated two figures approaching.

"Oh, are you going to call him Tom?" gasped Grace.

"I don't see why not," was the calm answer. "He looks just like the sort of a nice young chap whom one would call Tom."

"Betty Nelson!" cried Mollie. "I'm going to tell----"

"Hush!" commanded the Little Captain, quickly. "I haven't done it yet."

Mr. Hammond presented the young man, who seemed quite at his ease under the scrutiny of four pairs of eyes--pretty eyes, all of them, too.

"You needn't worry when Tom is along," said the overseer with a laugh, as he named each of the girls in turn. "Now go off and have a good time. I depend on you, Tom, to bring them safely back."

"I will, Mr. Hammond. Are you ready, young ladies?" and he smiled at them.

The girls started for the boat, into which a colored boy had already put the baskets of lunch. Somehow or other Betty naturally fell into step beside Tom. She looked up at him frankly and said:

"Mr. Hammond told us your last name, but I have forgotten it, I'm ashamed to say."

"It's Osborne. But I'd rather you'd call me Tom, if you don't mind. Everyone does around here--that is, all my friends, of course," he added quickly.

"Then we'd like to be your friends," said Betty with a smile, and a calm look at Mollie, who was making signs behind Tom's back. Obvious signs they were, too. Betty looked triumphant, as though saying: "There, didn't I tell you?"

Tom Osborne proved that he knew something about motor boats, and was also versed in the ways of making girls comfortable. He asked if they wanted him to steer, and as Betty had not taken her craft down the river very often she agreed. The girls sat on the after deck, under a wide-spread awning, and chatted of the sights they saw.

They emerged into Lake Chad, skirted its shores and swept into the river beyond. They passed several other power craft and one or two houseboats in which were gay parties.

At the suggestion of Tom, they decided to go up a little side stream to where he said was a pleasant place to eat lunch, and this they reached about noon.

"Now, if you girls want to walk about and see what there is to be seen," he told them, "I'll get out the victuals and set the table on the grass under that tree," and he indicated it. "I'll call you when I'm ready."

Betty and her chums assented, and Tom proceeded to set out the luncheon. The girls strolled on for some distance, and Mollie, attracted by some flowers on the end of a small spit of land, extending for some distance into the stream, walked toward them, the others following.

They picked many blossoms, and were watching a pair of large turtles when Amy, glancing toward the main land, which was reached by crossing a narrow neck of sand, uttered a cry of alarm.

"Look!" she gasped, pointing to two long, black objects stretched right across the narrow place. "Alligators! Two big ones!"

It was only too true. The girls' way back was blocked.



CHAPTER XVIII

BETWEEN TWO PERILS

"What--what are we going to do?" gasped Grace. She, as Betty said afterward, seemed always to be the first to ask questions that were hard to answer in an emergency. "They--they may attack us!"

"Why can't you say something less--less scary?" demanded Mollie who, after the first gasp of fright, had come forward to stand beside Betty. Amy had already shrunk to a place in the rear near Grace. It seemed to be always thus, with Betty and Mollie facing the immediate danger, and Grace and Amy needing protection.

Not that they were not brave when occasion demanded it. They would not have been outdoor girls else, but somehow the first fear of something menacing sent Amy and Grace scurrying to the rear, whence it needed considerable persuasion to bring them to the van again.

"They--they don't seem to see us," ventured Amy, after a few tense seconds, during which the four had stared at the alligators.

"They won't see you and Grace at all, if you stay behind us," said Mollie a bit sharply. "There's no present danger, as far as I can see. Why don't you come out and help Betty and me throw stones at them?"

"Oh, you're never going to do that!" gasped Grace. "Why that would--make them mad!"

"Well," answered Betty, with a shrug of her shoulders, "I don't know that a mad alligator is any worse than any other kind. They're all mad, as far as I'm concerned, and throwing stones at them can't make them any worse. I rather side with Mollie. We may drive them away."

"Yes, and it may drive them toward us," cried Amy. "Please don't!"

"We won't coax them this way if we can help it," said Betty. "You may be sure of that. But we must do something. We can't stay out on this almost-island much longer. We'll have to eat, and----"

"Where's Tom?" suddenly asked Grace. "He ought to be able to rescue us. He knows all about alligators--and--and such things."

"Yes, maybe he can charm them away," suggested Mollie half-sarcastically. "But I don't see him."

The girls looked toward where they had left their escort setting the "table" on the grass. They had a glimpse of the white cloth, and the various things upon it, but Tom was not in sight.

"Maybe--maybe an alligator ate him!" said Grace. She was half-crying now.

"Don't be silly!" directed Betty in a stern tone. It was sometimes necessary to be severe with Grace when she was likely to give way to her feelings. But in this case Betty did not want to be too much so, for she realized all that her chum had suffered in the disappearance of her brother.

The two big alligators, and they were exceptionally large, so the girls said afterward, seemed to have taken permanent possession of the narrow neck of land that connected the peninsula with the main shore. The girls were practically prisoners on what, with a rise of the river, would be an island.

"They don't seem to be coming after us," remarked Mollie looking about for some stones, or anything else, to use as a weapon of offense.

"No, they're just waiting their time," said Amy, who was still clinging to Grace. "When they get ready they'll crawl out here and--and--what is it alligators do to you, anyhow--charm you?"

"You're thinking of snakes," said Betty, narrowly watching the saurians. "Alligators knock you down with their tails, I understand, sort of stun you, and----"

"Spare us the horrible details," interrupted Mollie, and she drawled it out in such a funny way that the others laughed.

The alligators evinced no intention of coming forward. They were moving about, seeming to scoop out resting places in the hot sand, on which the sun poured fierce rays. Then, having made themselves comfortable, stretched out at full length, the creatures sunned themselves.

The girls were getting uncomfortable now, for they were in an exposed position, and the day was warm. There was very little shade on that small peninsula.

"We've got to get help!" decided Mollie at length. "For some reason our escort has deserted us, and----"

"Oh, don't say that!" cried Betty. "I'm sure he can't have done that."

"Well, he isn't there; is he?" demanded Mollie, waving her hand toward the distant spread on the grass. "And I'd like to know where he is!"

"Maybe some of those men who were hanging about the orange grove, or who were after that poor, ragged young man, have taken Tom away," suggested Amy.

"Comforting--isn't she?" asked Mollie, appealing to the others.

"Well, I mean----"

"Oh, never mind--don't make it any worse," interrupted Mollie. "The question is what can we do?"

"Let's call for him," suggested Grace. "He can't have gone very far, and it's a still day. He'll hear us."

"It is rather strange where he could have gone," mused Betty. Anxiously she looked toward the main shore. There was no sight of Tom Osborne.

Together the girls raised their voices in a shout that must have carried far. They wailed, but there was no response. Then they called again, with like result. The outdoor girls looked anxiously at one another. The alligators seemed disposed to maintain their position indefinitely, and the neck of land was so narrow that the saurians occupied the entire width of it.

"Well, here goes!" cried Betty when it was evident that their calls were not going to be heeded. With that she threw a stone at the nearest alligator. Her aim was exceptionally good. Betty admitted that herself, afterward, the missile falling on the broad and scaly back of the reptile.

"Oh--oh!" cried Grace. "Now you have done it, Bet!"

They all looked and waited. Nothing happened. The alligator merely moved his tail slightly and did not open his eyes.

"Well, I don't see that I did very much," said Betty calmly. "I'm going to try again."

"Don't!" begged Grace. "They may come for us!"

At that moment Amy, who had gone back a little way toward the far end of the spit of land, uttered a cry.

"What is it?" cried Mollie. "Is there another alligator there?"

"No, but I have found a way to get off, and back to the shore without going near those creatures. See! here is a sand bar curving from the side here, right around to that other point of land. You can see bottom all the way to shore. It isn't more than a few inches deep, and we can wade."

They all ran to where Amy stood, forgetting for the time being the alligators that held them prisoners.

"That's so! It can be done!" cried Betty, taking in at a glance Amy's plan. "We can wade right along that raised bar. The water is deep on either side of it, but as she says, it is only a few inches deep on top of the bar. Come on, girls," and she sat down and began unbuttoning her shoes.

"Don't--don't!" cried Mollie. "Keep them on. What if we do get wet? Our shoes will soon dry, it's so hot. And there might be crabs or little fishes or--little alligators on the bar. We'll wade in our shoes."

"All right, I'd just as soon," agreed Betty.



**IN THE SHALLOW WATER OVER THE BAR
WERE A NUMBER OF REPTILES.—Page 153.**

The Outdoor Girls in Florida.

Little Captain that she was, she prepared to take the lead. She was about to step out into the shallow water when she drew back with a gasp.

"What's the matter--cold?" asked Mollie.

"No--but look--snakes!"

Betty pointed to where, pursuing their sinuous way in the shallow water over the bar, were a number of reptiles.

"Moccasins," whispered Mollie. "We--we can't go that way either," and she glanced back toward the sleeping alligators. Both ways of escape were blocked.

CHAPTER XIX

LOST

Grace burst out crying. She said she knew it was silly, and not at all what an outdoor girl should do, and, very contritely afterward, she told the others how sorry she was that she had given way. But she just could not seem to help it. Without reserve she sobbed on Amy's shoulder.

For a moment Mollie and Betty, looking at one another, feared that Amy, too, would give way to her feelings, and that they would have two hysterical ones on their hands. But the little outburst of Grace seemed to act as a sort of tonic to Amy, who put her arms about her chum, murmuring comforting words.

"Oh, what--what are we going to do?" sobbed Grace.

"We're not going to cry--at any rate!" snapped Mollie. "At least I'm not."

There was an incisiveness--a sharpness--to her voice that made Grace look up a bit angrily.

"I--I'm not crying!" she said, and there was more energy in her voice than had been noticeable for some time.

"Well, it's a very good imitation of it then," went on Mollie. "Crying isn't going to do any good, and it gets on the nerves of all of us."

"I'm sorry--I couldn't seem to help it," spoke Grace, in a low voice. "I--I won't do it again. But oh, what are we going to do?"

No one knew what to answer. Certainly they were in a situation that needed help to enable them to escape from it. They could not approach the alligators--at least they did not think they could, though perhaps the creatures would have fled when the girls came near. And the snakes, while not aggressive, seemed to be numerous in the water that offered the only ford to shore. And moccasins, the girls had been told, were deadly poisonous.

"If Tom would only come!" muttered Betty. "I can't see what keeps him," and she looked anxiously toward where the luncheon was spread. But there was no sign of the young man.

"Maybe we could drive the snakes away by throwing more stones," suggested Grace, who seemed to have gotten over her little hysterical outburst. "Let's try it."

"It's worth trying," admitted Betty. "At least I don't believe the snakes would come out to attack us, and we might be able to drive them away."

The girls, glad of the chance to do something, collected a pile of stones and showered them into the water. Then when the ripples had cleared they peered anxiously at the sand bar.

"They're gone!" cried Amy joyously. "Now we can wade to shore."

"Better wait," advised Mollie.

There was an anxious pause, and then Betty said in a hopeless sort of tone:

"No, there they come back again," and she pointed to where the writhing serpents could be seen. Evidently the sand bar was a sort of feeding place for them, and though they might disappear for the moment at some disturbance, they returned.

Hopelessly the girls looked at one another. Then they glanced into the water, that seemed fairly swarming with the snakes. There appeared to be more than ever of them. Then Amy looked toward the neck of land and gave a cry of surprise--of joy.

"Look!" she exclaimed. "They're going--the alligators. At least they're--moving!"

"I hope they don't move toward us!" gasped Grace.

The saurians indeed seemed waked into life. Whether they had completed their sun bath, or whether the call of their appetites moved them, it was impossible to say. But they were walking about, dragging their ponderous, fat, squatty bodies, and their big tails.

"Let's tell 'em we're in a hurry," suggested Betty, as she caught up a stone. Running forward she threw it with such

good aim that it struck one of the saurians on the head. With a sort of surprised grunt the creature slid off the narrow neck of sand into the water. The other followed with a splash.

"There they go!" cried Mollie. "Come on now, before they take a notion to come back. Oh girls! I'm nearly starved!"

Betty laughed at this--it was characteristic of Mollie, once the immediate stress was removed, to revert to the matter that had previously claimed her attention, and this had been their luncheon.

"Come on!" she cried, and ran toward the main shore.

Betty said afterward that they had never run so fast, not even at the school games, where the outdoor girls had made records for themselves on the cinder track. Just who reached shore first is a matter of no moment--in fact it must have been a "dead heat," as Tom Osborne said afterward.

As the girls passed the place where the alligators had been sunning themselves they gave one look each into the water where the saurians had disappeared. One look only, and they did not pause to do that. But they saw no signs of the ugly creatures.

"Safe!" cried Betty, and the girls, breathless from their run, were safe. They gathered about the eatables on the grass.

"Oh, where can Tom be?" cried Betty anxiously. "I--I hope nothing has happened to him!"

"Now who is making direful suggestions, I'd like to know?" asked Grace.

"Well, it is queer to have him disappear that way," voiced Mollie. "But I'm going to be impolite and--eat."

She approached the "table," an example followed by the others. Certainly Tom had done his work exceedingly well. The spread was very inviting.

Betty looked all around the little glade on the edge of the river, where the table was set. There was no sign of their escort. The *Gem* floated lazily where she was moored, and the scene was quiet and peaceful enough. But there was a certain mystery about the disappearance of Tom Osborne.

"Well, we may as well eat," sighed Betty. "Then we can look about a bit. There won't be any alligators inland, I guess."

Even the fright the girls had experienced had not taken away their appetites, and soon they were making merry over the meal, which was a bountiful one--they could well trust Aunt Hannah for that.

But "between bites," as it were, Betty and the others looked about for a sign of the young man. He did not appear, however, nor were there any sounds of his approach. The woods back from the river teemed with bird and animal life. The latter was not so visible as the former, for the feathered creatures flitted here and there amid the branches, bursting into various melodious notes.

The meal went on; it was finished. The girls packed up with a little sense of disappointment. They felt that their outing had been rather spoiled. They saved enough for Tom in case he should come back hungry, which would very likely be the case.

"Well, we may as well put things on board," said Betty, at length. "We can't stay here much longer. It's getting late."

"But can we--ought we--go back without Tom?" asked Mollie.

"I don't see what else we can do--if he doesn't come," said Betty. "We can't stay here all night."

The *Gem* was made ready for the trip back. Then came a time of anxious waiting as the shadows lengthened. Betty, as well as the others, was getting nervous.

"We simply must go," said the Little Captain, at length. "He will have to come back as best he can. I don't see what made him go away. I am quite sure Mr. Hammond will not like it."

"But if we go, can Tom find his way back?" asked Grace.

"He'll have to. But of course we'll tell Mr. Hammond, and he, and some of the men, can come for Tom, if they think it necessary."

There seemed nothing else to do, and presently the girls went aboard, taking the remains of the lunch with them.

"We ought to leave some sort of note for Tom, telling him what happened, and that we couldn't wait any longer," suggested Mollie, as Betty was about to start.

"That's so. I didn't think of that. We'll do it."

"And leave him some lunch, too," voiced Amy.

"Good!" cried Betty. "Tom has one friend, at least."

A goodly packet of lunch was done up, and placed in a tree, well wrapped, where it would be sure to be seen. Then a note was left, with a brief account of what had happened, and the information that the girls had gone back to Orangeade.

"He ought to see that!" remarked Betty, stepping back to inspect her handiwork. She had pinned a small square of white paper, containing the writing, to a sheet of light brown manila, so that it was visible for some distance.

"It looks like a whole book--instead of a note," laughed Mollie.

The *Gem* was started and began dropping down the branch stream toward the main river. At least the girls hoped it was the main river when they turned into a larger body of water. But as they puffed on, amid the lengthening shadows, an annoying doubt began to manifest itself in Betty's mind. She glanced at the shores from time to time.

"Girls," she said finally, "does everything look right?"

"Do you mean--your hair?" asked Amy.

"No, I mean the scenery. Is it familiar? Have we been here before? Did we come this way?"

They all stared at Betty.

"What--what do you mean?" faltered Grace.

"Well, I don't seem to remember this place," went on Betty. "I'm afraid we've taken the wrong turn in the river, and that----"

"You don't mean to say that we're lost; do you?" cried Mollie.

"I'm afraid so," was Betty's low-voiced reply.

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!"

CHAPTER XXI

TO THE RESCUE

For a few seconds it was like a tableau, the strange young man, more ragged than before (if that were possible) standing in the midst of the clearing, and gazing as though spellbound at the girls in the motor boat.

On their part, Betty and her chums, following the half-whispered announcement made by Betty, stared at The Loon almost as if he might be a ghost of the Florida forest.

For perhaps a quarter of a minute they all remained thus, scarcely moving--hardly breathing--and then the young man made a slow turn. He seemed about to plunge back into the tangle whence he had come.

"Don't do that!" said Mollie, hardly above a whisper. "He mustn't do that!" and she seemed appealing to her chums. "We must keep him here--speak to him--perhaps he knows where Tom went."

"Or, if he doesn't, perhaps he can tell us which way to go to get home," breathed Grace. "He's some company, anyhow."

The Loon, to give him the title bestowed on him by the men in the boat, hesitated as he caught the sound of whispering. He shifted from one foot to the other, much after the manner of some animal seeking to escape unnoticed.

He took a step backward. By this time Betty had brought her boat close to the extending tree branch, where she had made fast before. The power had been shut off and the *Gem* had drifted to the former mooring place. Now Betty was ready for action.

"I beg your pardon," she said in a low voice, and with an intonation calculated to disperse the fears of even the most timid youth, "but will you be so good as to help us again? We are the girls, you know, whose boat you got when the manatee was towing it away."

"Wha--what?" gasped the other, and he seemed much afraid.

"We're the same girls," went on Betty. "You know, we saw you poling down the river that day. If you come closer you can see us and make sure. We need help again. We are lost and a friend of ours is missing. Wait, I'll light the lamps," and with a turn of the switch Betty set aglow the electric lights, operated by a storage battery.

The youth started again. Clearly he was a most timid creature.

"We saw the men who were after you," put in Mollie, thinking to add to his confidence. "And we didn't tell; did we, girls."

"No!" came in a chorus. In spite of the rather unprepossessing appearance of the youth the girls were glad to see him.

"Now will you help us again?" asked Mollie. "We've had a dreadful time, and we need help. You won't go away; will you?"

"N--no!" was the hesitating answer. "I came to look for you, but I wasn't sure--you see I have to be so careful."

"Gracious, I wonder if he thinks we wanted to capture him?" thought Grace, feeling about amid the cushions for some chocolates. That was a sure sign Grace had recovered her equanimity.

"You came to look for us?" echoed Betty, wonderingly.

"Yes, miss," was the answer. "He sent me to find you."

"He? Who do you mean?" Betty questioned anxiously.

"Tom--Tom Osborne. He told me to come here and tell you he couldn't come."

"Couldn't come--why?" Betty's voice had a note of fear in it now.

"Cause they've caught him. He's cotched, Miss."

"Caught? By whom?" It was Mollie who questioned now.

Before answering The Loon, which name seemed to fit the poor creature well, glided forward, glancing back

nervously over his shoulder now and then, as though he feared pursuit.

"Oh dear!" murmured Grace. "I don't like this. It's worse than the ghost of the island."

"Be quiet," urged Betty. "It may be all right yet. I'm going to light more lamps."

Thus far she had only set aglow one in the after cockpit, and the red and green side lights, together with the one on the small signal mast. Now she flooded the cabin with radiance, for it was getting more and more gloomy in the forest clearing.

"Won't you come aboard?" urged Betty kindly. "We will do all we can for Tom Osborne if he is in trouble. We can't understand why he deserted us. We have been in much distress, we got lost and had to come back. Come aboard and tell us all about it so we will know what to do. Perhaps you are hungry. We left food there," and she indicated it. "Bring it here, and then perhaps you can take us back to the bungalow. The men there will organize a searching party if need be. But tell us who has caught Tom."

The Loon did not answer for a minute. He looked to where Betty pointed, saw the packet of food and went toward it eagerly. Then he brought it to the moored boat.

"I am hungry," he said simply.

"Then eat first, and talk later," urged Mollie. "I know what it is to be hungry."

"I'll admit I'm hungry now," said Grace. "We left enough food so we could have some, I think."

"Hush! we had a good lunch," said Betty, "and there is no telling what will happen before morning. Grace, you and Amy might make some hot chocolate."

"Will you tell us your name now, or are you still afraid?" asked Betty of the youth, who was eating ravenously. "The men called you--The Loon--I believe it was."

"Yes, Miss, that's my name. You see I'm not quite right in the head. I got hurt when I was a baby. I'm harmless, but I can't do much work--I'm not strong. My name is Harry Jackson."

"And have you no home--no friends?"

"Not as I knows on, Miss, no. I had an uncle once, but he died. I live around the camps--sometimes the men is good to me, and sometimes not."

He ate quickly, but daintily, and was not all uncouth. From time to time he glanced about like some frightened animal.

"They calls me The Loon," he went on. "But I know some things. I know more than they want me to."

"Do you think you could pilot this boat to Mr. Stonington's place?" asked Mollie with much anxiety.

"Yes, Miss, I could. I know my way all around these waters. I can take you there. But we ought to help him--help Tom and the other one. I promised I'd come for you."

"Then tell us where Tom is--who has him--how did he come to send you for us--who is 'the other one'?"

Betty questioned thus rapidly. The Loon passed his hand over his forehead as though to brush away the cobwebs from his poor brain. Then he said:

"The same men caught him, Miss.

"What same men?"

"The ones who were after me. There's a camp back there in the woods, and they have him, and the other one, too. I started for help for him long ago, but they got after me and took me back. Then they brought Tom in this afternoon. He saw me and told me to come for you. They didn't see him tell me. We've got to go to the rescue."

"I should say we had!" exclaimed Betty. "This is all very mysterious, Harry." She could not bear to call him The Loon. "Can you tell us any more about all this? Why did Tom go away?"

"That's it!" cried the queer youth. "That's what I've been trying to remember. He told me to be sure and tell you that he didn't run away. He saw you getting flowers, he said, and he went off in the woods a way to look for some rare kind for you. He didn't mean to go so far. Then the men caught him, and took him away before he could warn you. That's what he wanted me to be sure and tell you. Now I've remembered," and he seemed quite pleased in his own peculiar

way.

"But who is this other one you started to help?" asked Grace, a strange eagerness creeping into her voice.

"Wait, please, wait," begged The Loon, again passing his hand over his brow. "I can't think very fast. I know the bad men in the lumber camp had Tom, and the other one--I don't know his name. But maybe we can rescue them both. If you'll come----"

He sprang from the boat to the tree branch and thence ashore. Then he stood waiting in the glare of the boat's lights.

"Wait," said Betty gently. "We must go for help, first. Come, Harry, get aboard and take us to the orange grove. Then we will get Mr. Hammond and some men to come to the rescue."



CHAPTER XXII

THE EVERGLADE CAMP

The Loon stood irresolute for a few seconds. He seemed to want to rush off into the dark woods again, and evidently expected the girls to follow him. But, though they were very anxious to effect the rescue of their friend Tom, and the other unknown, held in some distant camp, Betty and her chums would take no risks.

"Come!" called the Little Captain to the simple-minded lad, "we will go for help, and soon be back here--if you can guide us."

"Oh, yes, I know the way all over these parts--even in the Everglades."

"Are there Everglades here?" asked Mollie, who had heard much of those strange, floating forests.

"A small patch," answered The Loon, "but not much like the real Everglades. It is a big swampy tract, and the camp is in there."

"A turpentine camp?" asked Grace, filled with sudden hope.

"No, the bosses are getting out a certain kind of wood. Oh! but it is hard work. The wood is partly under water, and the bugs and mosquitoes and alligators are terrible. I ran away, for I couldn't stand it."

"Poor fellow," murmured Amy. "Oh, to think of Tom Osborne and some other young fellow being there."

"Just like my poor brother Will," agreed Grace. "Oh, I wonder if he could be the 'other one' he refers to! Listen," she went on to the simple youth eagerly, "I am going to describe a young man to you. I want you to tell me if he is like the one you once tried to rescue--the time you saved our boat," and she gave a close description of her brother.

"Is the 'other one' like that?" she asked breathlessly.

The Loon shook his head.

"No," he said slowly, "not at all like that. He is very thin, this one, and he is lame."

"Oh dear!" half sobbed Grace. "I was beginning to have such hope!"

"Never mind," consoled Betty. "We will find your brother yet. Come now, we are losing time. Come, Harry," she said gently.

"And the other one, too?" he asked eagerly. "I promised I would help him, and took his money; but I lost it."

"Yes, we will rescue him, too," said Betty. "Come now."

The Loon was satisfied that his friend would be helped, so he sprang into the boat. Betty started the engine and then, with the powerful gas headlight aglow, she turned the wheel over to The Loon.

However simple-minded the poor youth might be, however undecided and timid in the forest, he seemed to be a new person on the water. There was a self-reliance about him, a poise and a certain ability that he seemed to have acquired suddenly. Without a trace of hesitation he guided the boat through the winding course of the creek that flowed into the main stream.

Coming to the turn he took an entirely different direction from that followed by the girls.

"That's where we made our mistake!" exclaimed Mollie.

The Loon did not respond--he was too busy peering ahead at the dark water, which was illuminated only for a comparatively short distance by the searchlight.

"Suppose--suppose we hit--an alligator!" voiced Grace.

"Don't suppose at all," retorted Betty. "It's bad for the nerves."

It was now so dark that the girls could not see just the course taken, and so could not know where it was they had made other mistakes. But the darkness did not seem to bother The Loon. Like the bird whose name he bore he seemed able to see in the gloom as well as in the light.

"Are we coming back with the men when they make the rescue?" asked Grace.

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Amy. "I'd be afraid."

"I wouldn't!" declared Mollie. "I think we ought to come along."

"So do I!" added Grace. "That other one, of whom Harry spoke, may be my brother after all; even if it isn't a turpentine camp we are going to."

"It hardly seems possible," objected Betty. "The description is so different. And Will isn't lame."

"No," responded Grace, in a low voice. "But, oh, how I wish we could rescue him!"

"Did this other young man--the one who gave you money--tell you his name?" asked Betty, determined to try again to bring some glimmer of memory to The Loon.

"Yes," answered the simple-minded lad, "but I can't think of it. My mind isn't all there," he added cheerfully, as though it was something to be proud of.

"It wasn't Will, was it?" asked Grace.

"No. The men called him Hippity-hop, 'cause he was lame, I guess. But maybe I could find your brother."

"I wish someone could," murmured Grace, with a half sob.

The *Gem* chugged on through the darkness, making turn after turn, twisting here and there in the water, The Loon seeming to know the channel perfectly. In a much shorter time than the girls had expected they made a turn that a few seconds later brought them out on a broad stream.

"Now I know where we are!" cried Betty. "This is the Mayfair river--our river; isn't it?"

"Yes," answered The Loon. "We shall soon be at your orange grove now."

A few minutes later they saw a sudden glare of light and heard the firing of guns. Then they noticed boats here and there on the stream, each one containing several lanterns, while the occupants were shouting from time to time.

"Look! Look!" exclaimed Grace.

"Hush!" called Betty. "They are calling us!"

The girls could distinguish their names being spoken.

"They're searching for us!" cried Mollie. "Here we are!" she shouted, and her voice carried to the searchers and as they saw the lights of the *Gem* the boats converged toward her.

Mr. Stonington and Mr. Hammond were in one, and Amy's "uncle" greeted her and the others with alarm in his tones.

"What happened? Where were you? We have imagined all sorts of terrible things about you."

"We got lost," explained Betty quickly, "and some men have captured Tom. They are holding him a prisoner in an Everglade camp. This young man can take us back there. We must rescue him," and they quickly filled in the other details of the story.

"Well, this beats all!" exclaimed Mr. Hammond. "Those timber men are getting worse and worse all the while. We'll have to teach them a lesson!"

"Will you rescue them?" asked The Loon.

"Surely, Harry," spoke the foreman, who knew the simple-minded lad. "We'll get right after the fellows. What do you say, Mr. Stonington?"

"I say yes, of course."

"And may we come?" asked Grace. "My brother may be there."

The two men did not answer for a moment. Then Mr. Hammond said in a low voice:

"Their launch would come in useful, and really there is not much danger in daylight."

"Very well," said Mr. Stonington. "I'll go along too."

"Aren't you going to rescue them to-night?" asked The Loon.

"It would be impossible, Harry," said Mr. Hammond, gently. "They might escape in the darkness, and take your friend, and Tom, with them. We'll get ready to descend on their camp at daybreak. That will be best."

After some thought The Loon agreed to this, and those in the other searching boats, one or two of them being small launches, having been informed of the return of the girls, the whole flotilla went back to the orange grove.

The Loon was given a place to sleep, and then the girls told more of their story. Mr. Stonington told how, becoming worried over the long stay of the young people, he had organized a searching party, getting more and more alarmed as the hours went by without the return of Betty and her chums.

It was rather a restless night in Orangeade, and all were astir early, for they wanted to be at the Everglade camp by daylight. Two extra launches besides the *Gem* made the trip, the others carrying a number of sturdy men headed by Mr. Hammond. Mr. Stonington went with the girls, The Loon steering.

By taking a little different course the boats were able to approach close to the camp in the forest fastness, and at a signal from The Loon all came to a stop.

"We had better walk the rest of the way," said the half-witted lad. "They may hear the boats."

"Good idea," said Mr. Hammond. "Harry is smarter than any of us think."

A faint gleam of light was beginning to straggle through the trees when the party, with The Loon in the lead, set off to march to the Everglade camp. There was a narrow trail, and Mr. Stonington insisted on the girls keeping to the rear.

Silent was the approach, and the only sounds heard were those made by the awakening denizens of the woods. Presently those in front of the girls halted. Word was whispered back along the line:

"We're there!"

"Then don't you come any farther," said Mr. Stonington to Betty and the others. "There may be no trouble; but it's best to be on the safe side. We'll bring the rescued ones back here."

Wondering what would happen, and not a little alarmed, the girls waited.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE ESCAPE

Taken by surprise by the sudden rush of Mr. Hammond and his men those in charge of the Everglade camp, and the miserable creatures they held in virtual bondage, offered little resistance. There was neither time nor chance for any.

Well armed, but fortunately not being obliged to use their weapons, the men from the orange grove made such a show of strength that resistance seemed out of the question.

The camp, as the girls saw afterward, was merely a collection of miserable huts. Some were better than others, and it was to these that the rescuers turned their attention, for in them were the "bosses" of the camp.

Mr. Hammond and his men made a rush for these, and, surrounding them, called on those within to surrender. At first there was sleepy-eyed surprise as the rough men ran out. Some showed a disposition to fight, but Mr. Hammond coolly said:

"It's of no use, men. We've got you just where we want you, and we're enough in numbers to take you all prisoners. We only want a couple of young fellows you have here."

"We've a right to all the help we have!" growled the leader of the campers: "We've got the papers to show it, too!"

"I don't doubt but what you've got papers--forged ones, though," replied Mr. Hammond sternly. "We won't dispute that. But you haven't any papers for my man, Tom Osborne."

"Tom Osborne--your man--was he the one that----"

The leader began thus, but he did not finish. He saw the damaging admission he was about to make.

"Yes, Tom Osborne!" exclaimed Mr. Hammond. "I say Tom, where are you?" he called, loudly.

"Here, Mr. Hammond!" was a shout from a distant shack. "Are the young ladies all right?"

"Yes, they're here to help rescue you. Tumble over there, some of you," directed Mr. Hammond to his men, "and let Tom out. Break in the door!"

"I say now!" began the leader of the campers, "that won't do----"

"That's enough from you," warned Mr. Hammond sternly. "Smash in that door, men!"

A little later Tom Osborne, rather forlorn and miserable from his night's imprisonment in a tumble-down shack, walked out, his bonds having been cut.

"Now for your friend, Harry," said Mr. Hammond to The Loon. "We must get him out next."

"There's some young fellow in the shack next to where I was," said Tom Osborne. "I heard him talking to himself early in the evening, but not since daylight. I guess he's the one you mean."

A rush was made for the wretched place, and the door was burst in, but the hut was empty.

"He's gone!" cried The Loon. "They've taken him to some other place. Oh, I'll never be able to keep my word to him!"

"We'll find him," declared Mr. Hammond. "I don't know who he was, but we'll get him. Look in every shack, men!"

In turn every cabin was inspected. Many wretched young men, and some old ones, too, were routed out, but the proprietors of the camp seemed to have a right to their services, either by contract, or through the action of the criminal laws. Sad indeed was their plight, but the rescuers had no legal right to take them away.

"Though I can, and will, proceed against you for taking Tom Osborne," declared Mr. Hammond. "And I'll see to it that you get the punishment you deserve."

Mr. Stonington said something in a low voice to the overseer.

"Oh, yes," went on Mr. Hammond. "If you want to tell what became of this other young man, whom you seem to have kept against his will, I'll do what I can to have your sentence lightened."

"He must have got away," said the head lumberman, sullenly. "He was such a spunky chap that we kept him locked up. And we had a right to him, too. He signed a contract."

"Probably an illegal one, if I'm any judge of your methods," said Mr. Hammond, grimly. "I don't blame him for getting away, but I wish we could have rescued him. He may be in a bad plight in this swamp."

An inspection of the cabin where Tom had said some other prisoner had been held showed a board forced off in the rear, and it was evident that the unknown young man had gotten out this way when the guard was asleep--for the camp was kept under guard, so fearful were the bosses that their wretched slaves would escape.

"Well, we can't do much more here," said Mr. Hammond, looking about. They had inspected every cabin, and the men had searched in various places.

"You have my last word," said Mr. Hammond, grimly, as the rescue party prepared to leave the miserable camp, "if you produce that young man I'll do what I can to have the courts deal easy with you. If not--you'll get the limit!"

"I tell you he escaped!" insisted the head of the lumbermen. "And if you think you can scare us, go ahead. If you hadn't so many with you, and if my men had the spunk of chickens, there'd be a different ending to this," he added, vindictively.

"Don't be rash," advised Mr. Hammond.

The girls were permitted a distant view of the camp, and then they started for their boats, Tom in the midst of the girls, explaining to them his seeming desertion. The Loon was worried over his failure to rescue the unknown young man who had given him money.

"Never mind," consoled Mr. Hammond. "We may find him later. We'll keep a lookout as we go along. If he has any sense he'll get out of this swamp, anyhow."

"I wonder who he may be?" said Grace. "Oh, if only we could go to the rescue of my brother. I wish we would get some news of him."

"We all do, dear," spoke Mollie, gently.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE YOUTH ON THE RAFT

Tom Osborne, on the way back in the *Gem* with the girls and Mr. Stonington, told his story. He had prepared the luncheon, and, seeing the girls going out on the little neck of land to gather flowers, he recalled seeing some blooms, of the orchid variety, farther in the woods.

Thinking to give the girls a surprise, he decided to gather some before they returned. He set off, but the flowers grew farther away than he thought, and before he realized it he was a mile from the glade.

"Then, all at once," he related, "a couple of rough fellows sprang out at me, and before I could do anything they had me tied."

"How awful!" exclaimed Betty.

"I thought so at the time," said Tom, grimly. "I couldn't imagine why they wanted me, but when they led me off into the swamp I understood. They were after workers, and they'd do anything to get them."

Happily the days are past when such things are done, but a few years ago, before the law intervened, men who were making money by getting valuable timber, and other products, from the Southern forests, stopped at little in order to obtain the necessary labor.

Tom was taken to the Everglade camp, which explains why the calls of the girls did not reach him. Strong and healthy, he was a great "find" for the unscrupulous contractors, but as he stubbornly refused to work he was made a prisoner in one of the shacks.

It was there that he got into communication with The Loon. Poor Harry, wandering about in the swamps and forests in search of the young man who, some time previous, had given him money to go for aid for him, came within talking distance of where Tom was locked up. Tom knew the half-witted fellow, and quickly whispered an appeal to him.

"I told him to go back and find you girls," said Tom, "and tell you why I couldn't get back. Then I asked him to tell you to get help."

"And I did," spoke The Loon, proudly.

"Indeed you did," declared Tom, patting him on the back.

"I only wish I could have helped the other one," went on Harry.

"But who was he--can't you tell his name, or something about him?" asked Mr. Hammond.

The Loon shook his head.

"I forget," he muttered. "All I know is that I saw him up in the other camp--away off. He gave me money then, and told me to go to someone--I forget who--to send a message over the telegraph wires, you know. He wrote it down, but I lost that and the money. Then I went back, but they had taken him away. I trailed him, though, and found him where I saw Tom. Then I ran to meet you girls. I was afraid, too."

"You were brave, Harry," said Mr. Hammond.

"Was I?" asked the simple lad, well pleased.

Tom told more details of his imprisonment; how he heard sounds from an adjoining cabin that would indicate some other unfortunate was held there. He heard the men discussing his case, and planning to force him to work in the morning.

Then had come the rescue.

Through the gathering morning light the *Gem* proceeded on her way. Tom was at the wheel, having been refreshed by coffee which Betty and Mollie made aboard their craft.

A lookout was kept for any signs of a refugee on the way back to the orange grove, but none was seen.

"He may be hiding in the swamp," said Mr. Hammond. "He may come out after dark, and make his way to our place. I hope he does."

"I am going to look for him," said The Loon.

Poor fellow! In spite of his simple ways, he showed a devotion of which one with a stronger mind might have been proud.

"Can't something be done for him?" asked Mr. Stonington, nodding in the direction of Harry. "Ought not we to keep him with us?"

"It would be hard work," answered Mr. Hammond. "He is used to going and coming as he pleases. He wanders all about this region. He is harmless."

Without further incident the orange grove was reached. Tom Osborne, tired and worn out, received every attention, and was soon himself again. Mr. Hammond communicated with the authorities regarding the men of the camp, but little could be done. There were legal complications hard to avoid.

"But, at any rate," said Mr. Stonington, "we have rescued Tom, and that other young man has escaped."

"Perhaps to a worse fate," observed Mr. Hammond.

Days passed. The outdoor girls enjoyed their life in the orange grove, but Grace fretted because no word came from her brother. He seemed to have disappeared completely.

Following the receipt of a letter from her father, containing no news, Grace was so gloomy that one day Betty proposed a ride in the launch.

"It will do you good," she said to Grace. "We will take our lunch again, and----"

"Get trapped by alligators or snakes?" suggested Amy.

"No!" declared Mollie. "We'll take The Loon along, and he will look after us," for Harry was back from one of his wanderings. He spent much time away from the grove, seeking in many strange places for the young man who had appealed to him for help. But he did not find him.

So the girls went for a little excursion. In spite of the gloom that seemed to hang over them they had an enjoyable time.

They were scanning the shores ahead of them, looking for a suitable place to land and eat their lunch, when Betty, who had taken the wheel, with The Loon to stand beside and direct her steering, uttered a cry and pointed ahead.

"See!" she said. "What is that?"

The other girls looked.

"Some sort of a raft," answered Mollie.

"And someone is on it!" added Amy.

"It's a man!" cried Grace. "A young man! Oh, maybe it's the one who escaped from the Everglade swamp. Hurry to him, Betty!"

As she spoke the figure on the raft rose to his knees, and waved a hand at the girls. Then the youth, for such he was seen to be, toppled over on his rude craft, and went drifting down the current.

CHAPTER XXV

WILL FORD

"Slow up a little, Betty. Now ahead to starboard! Reverse! I have it!"

Thus cried Mollie, who stood at the bow of the *Gem* with a boathook in her grasp, while the motor craft approached the rude raft on which lay the body of an unconscious youth. Mollie had caught the hook in the edge of the boards and the motor boat was now beside it.

"What--what are we going to do with him?" asked Amy.

"Get him aboard, of course," said Betty, shortly. She was busy making fast a line to a projection on the raft. The *Gem* was now drifting with the craft containing the young man.

"We never can!" cried Grace. "Oh, perhaps he's----"

She did not say what she thought.

"We've just got to get him up here, and take him to a doctor," declared Betty, fiercely. "He looks half-starved."

There was a moment of hesitation among the girls--a natural hesitation--and then Betty and Mollie with an understanding look at each other climbed from the boat to the raft. It was big and strong enough to support much more weight; for, though it was rudely made, it was substantial, being composed of tree trunks, and boards, bound together with withes, forest vines, and bits of rope.

"He--he's breathing--anyhow," said Mollie, softly.

"Yes, we--we must lift him up," spoke Betty. "Come on."

They exposed the pale and drawn face of the youth on the raft. At the sight of it Grace, who with Amy was leaning breathlessly over the side of the boat, uttered a cry.

"It's Will!" she screamed, half-hysterically. "It's my brother Will!"

Betty and Mollie started back, and nearly let the limp body slip off the raft.

"What--what!" cried Betty, for the figure of the youth bore no resemblance to Will; nor did the features. But the eyes of a sister were not to be deceived.

"It is Will!" she cried. "I have been hoping and praying all the while that it might be he--and it is. It's Will!"

She would have gotten down to the raft had not Amy restrained her.

"I believe it is Will," said Mollie, taking a closer look. "We have found him."

"Then let's get him aboard at once, and help him," said practical Betty. "Amy, start that coffee. Grace, you help us! And Harry, too!"

Thus the Little Captain issued her orders.

How they got Will Ford aboard the boat the girls could not tell afterward. But they did, with The Loon's aid, and soon he was being given hot coffee. Slowly his senses came back, and when some warm broth had been slowly fed to him he opened his eyes, looked wonderingly about him, and asked hoarsely:

"Is it real--or am I dreaming again?"

"It's real, Will dear," said Grace, putting her arms about him, as he lay in one of the bunks. "Oh, to think that we have found you again! Where have you been, and what happened to you?"

"Where haven't I been?" he asked, smiling a little. "And what hasn't happened to me?"

"But you're all right now," said Grace, comfortingly.

"But what in the world are you girls doing down here?" Will asked, wonderingly. "It's like a dream. How did you come here?"

"To rescue you," replied Mollie, with a laugh.

"Really?"

"Well, almost really."

Will grew better every minute and wanted to tell his story, but the girls insisted on waiting, except for the most important details, until he had reached the orange grove. To satisfy him, however, they told how they came to be in Florida.

As for The Loon, no sooner had he a sight of Will's face than he danced about like a child, and cried:

"That's him! That's the one! He's the one I went to get help for!"

"That's right, my boy," said Will, weakly.

"I--I lost the money and note," faltered poor Harry. "But I thought you had fooled me."

"But, after all, he was the means of saving Tom, and, in a way, you, also," said Grace.

"Who's Tom?" asked Will.

And they told him.

That there was surprise at Orangeade when the outdoor girls arrived with Will Ford can easily be imagined. The first thing done was to send a telegram to Mr. Ford, apprising him that his son was found.

Then Will told his story.

The first part the girls were already familiar with--how, tiring of life in Uncle Isaac's mill, he had determined to strike out for himself.

"Then I fell in with a plausible talker," explained Will, "and he persuaded me he had a great scheme for making money. Well, before I knew it I had signed some papers--foolishly. At first I was given decent clerical work to do, and then the scheme failed, I was transferred to another part of the State, and to another company, and in some way, by a juggling of contracts, not knowing what I was doing, it seems that I signed an agreement to work in a timber camp. Say, it was worse than being in prison, and some of the fellows were prisoners, I heard. There were one or two others like myself; but we couldn't get away.

"Then I wrote that letter to dad and threw it out of the car window. From then on I've lived a dog's life. I've been a regular slave. Many a time I'd have given anything to be back, even with Uncle Isaac. This has been a lesson to me."

Will went on to tell how he had been taken from place to place with the others until he finally was held in the Everglade swamp, and made to get out timber from the forest.

"I thought it was all up with me then," he said. "Before that I had met this chap," and he nodded toward The Loon. "I thought he could help me, and he promised to. I managed to speak to him on the quiet, and gave him what money I had managed to hide away from those slave-drivers. He went off, promising to bring help."

"And he tried, too," said Grace. "He helped us first, though." And she told of getting the motor boat away from the manatee.

"Just to think!" cried Will. "There he was, talking to you girls all the while, and me only a few miles away, though I was moved later."

"I--I'm sorry," spoke The Loon.

"Oh, you couldn't help it, Harry," voiced Betty, softly. "After all, it came out all right, and you helped a lot."

"Indeed he did," agreed Tom Osborne. "Only for him Will and I might still be prisoners."

Will related how he had broken from the shack shortly before the rescuers reached the Everglade camp, and how, after much suffering, having previously cut his foot, which made him lame, and wandering about in the woods, he had made the raft and floated down the river. What little food he had gave out, and he had fainted from weakness and exposure just as the girls' boat came in sight.

"But we have you back again," declared Grace.

"Yes, and you can make up your minds I'm not going to be so foolish again," spoke her brother. "This has been a lesson to me--one I won't forget in a hurry."

"Well, now you can stay with us and have a good time," said his sister. "I guess you need it."

"I sure do," said Will, fervently.

On hearing Will's story Mr. Hammond and Mr. Stonington went to the authorities again, to proceed against the unscrupulous men who had so mistreated him.

But they had left that part of the State, and could not be traced. One reason, Will thought, why they held him a prisoner, was because they had violated the law in regard to the treatment of the working-prisoners, and did not want to be reported. And the reason The Loon's description of Will gave no clue to the girls was because of Grace's brother's temporary lameness, and his change due to poor living and ragged clothes.

Then came happy days. Mr. and Mrs. Ford, rejoicing over the news of their son being found, sent word for him to stay with the girls, and they would join him in Florida. As for the girls--Mollie, Amy and Betty shared with Grace the fun of showing Will about the lovely place where they had spent the winter.

The Loon found a comfortable home with one of Mr. Hammond's workers, and made himself very useful about the orange grove. He could not do enough for the girls, or for Will and Tom, the latter two becoming fast chums, as they had been companions in misery.

"And to think that soon we will have to leave this lovely place," said Grace one day, when they had come back from a long trip on the river in the *Gem*. "It is perfect here."

"It is," agreed Mollie, "but do you know I am rather lonesome for the sight of a snowball, or an icicle."

"Mollie Billette!" cried Amy.

"Well, I am! Too much loveliness palls on one after a bit. Of course it's lovely here, Amy, but we are Northern girls, and one winter in the South can't change us."

"Well, we have certainly had some strange adventures here," remarked Betty, as she swung her boat up to the dock.

"And with all the orange blossoms, none of us has worn any yet," remarked Grace, laughing.

"Oh, I don't know," said Mollie, with a mischievous look at Betty. "I think some of us have a chance. I saw Tom Osborne out in the moonlight with you last night, Grace."

"You did not!"

"Yes, I did, and he----"

"Have a chocolate!" capitulated Grace.

And now the time has come to take leave of the outdoor girls--at least for a time. Perhaps we may meet them again, under other circumstances. For they are destined to have other adventures, fully as absorbing as those I have already set down.

THE END

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