

Third Place Fiction

## BELLE OF THE GLADES

1918

By Cheryl Abney

Isabelle held the Florida postcard with both hands. It pictured a huge hotel shaped like a T. Isabelle turned the worn card over and read her Uncle Arden's words, "Stayed here at the Ponce on my way to Ritta." Ritta. My new home.

Just then the conductor called, "Royal Poinciana stop!"

"Don't you dawdle, Isabelle. Be sure you've got everything from under your seat." Aunt Claire shouldered her way into the train's narrow aisle.

She followed her aunt to the exit, but froze on the top step and looked out at the dimly lit train station. The heat of the train and the heavy, outside air was smothering.

An attendant reached forward and helped Isabelle down. She ran to catch up with her Aunt's tall, black-skirted figure, sailing swiftly through the crowd, billowy white sleeves flowing in her wake.

Her aunt stopped beside what looked like the back half of a bicycle, with a white wicker chair attached in front. Eyes wide, Isabelle asked, "Are we going to ride in that?"

After helping the two ladies into the wide chair, the driver mounted the bicycle seat behind them. He huffed and puffed imaginary steam like a train, blew a whistle and rang the bell hanging from the handlebars. Isabelle looked back and shared a brief smile for this unexpected happy note.

As soon as they reached their room at the Ponce Hotel, Aunt Claire checked to see that the mattress was clean and firm. Isabelle dragged her feet over to the heavy velvet curtains, parted them, and saw the shining lights of the city beyond the bay of water.

"Aunt Claire, I wish you were going all the way to Ritta with me."

"Captain Zeke will get you safely there. Your mother sent your Uncle Arden a letter telling him of her failing health and your arrival."

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After Aunt Claire's hasty, morning goodbye, Isabelle sat stiff and quiet on the hard wood bench of Captain Zeke's boat as he navigated the Palm Beach Canal toward Ritta, on Lake Okeechobee.

"There Isabelle, look to the right of the bow. On the shore." The captain's wife pointed out front of the boat.

"I see! There really are alligators here! He doesn't look very big and dangerous though."

"Naw, that one could only take a couple fingers if you weren't quick."

She and Mrs. Zeke stayed at the rail to look for more gators. Isabelle couldn't help but overhear the gentlemen standing nearby.

"The glades must have its own Marshall. It may be the last frontier in Florida—in these United States even—but it need not remain a hideout for criminals!"

"It won't be easy finding a civilized man to brave outlaws in this rugged lake country. Why, you need carry a machete just to cut trail ahead of you through the sawgrass, and the mosquitoes eat you clean up if you walk out at night. There's neither electricity nor plumbing in most places! Some are living in tents and shacks!"

Isabelle's fascination was interrupted by Captain Zeke as the Glades Runner left the canal behind and entered a lake you could not see across. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is truly the last bit of uncivilized territory remaining in America."

Isabelle shivered as she stared out at the vast lake. Only sky and water surrounded her. She watched the water grow choppy and heard the waves hammer the side of the boat. Dark, threatening clouds moved across the blue sky. The breeze grew stronger and Isabelle took off her hat and clenched its rim in her fists.

Mrs. Zeke pulled rain slickers from the storage box and handed them out. As she placed a black slicker about Isabelle's shoulders, its size swallowed her up. Mrs. Zeke chuckled and gave her a comforting hug. "Don't worry none. Captain Zeke knows this lake well."

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As the Glades Runner pulled along side the dock at Ritta, Isabelle saw stacked crates, mailbags, and a handful of people. Roughly hewn out boats were shoved up on the narrow beach. Indians, people she knew only from picture books, stood beside the boats in their brightly striped, zigzag patterned shirts.

Isabelle fumbled to open the locket that hung around her neck. Her eyes flitted to the dock and back at the locket picture of her Uncle Arden. I don't see him. She swiped at the tears she had suppressed the entire trip. Now they stung her eyes and she ran to the gangplank, searching the strange faces. Would I recognize him if I saw him?

"Some storm, hah? Captain Zeke?" shouted the only woman on the dock.

"Sure blew in fast. Had to take shelter between Torry and Little Kreamer Islands."

The captain patted Isabelle's shoulder as she stood in the aisle beside him. "You all seen Arden today?"

"I saw his fishing boat go out early this morning" said the woman. She removed her neck scarf and swiped the sweat from her matted red brow.

"Early this morning, hah Sammy? Well, this young gal expected to see her uncle waiting at the dock to welcome her. Do you think you could take Isabelle up to your place until Arden arrives?"

Sammy stood with hands on her hips surveying Isabelle's pin-tucked blue blouse, navy pleated skirt and her several bags and boxes.

"Looks like she might be here for more than a visit, don't you think Cap?" She extended her hand to Isabelle. "Come on, hon. Your uncle will be here shortly."

Hearing the Glades Runner's engines as she and Sammy started up the path together, Isabelle glanced back over her shoulder. She stumbled over a stick in the path and Sammy hauled her up by her arm. Both stood to watch Captain Zeke's boat pull away from the dock. Isabelle blinked repeatedly to stop the flow of tears. She didn't want Sammy to see her cry, but a snuffle escaped her. Sammy squeezed her shoulder gently and the two turned back inland.

"That's my place there." Sammy pointed toward a gray wood building that stood on stilts. Its steps climbed to a screened door beneath the large red letters S-A-M-S. "This here is store, meetin place, and post office."

The solitary store didn't help calm Isabelle's fears as she climbed the stairs after Sammy, one heavy step at a time.

"My stomach is growling for food. Is yours Isabelle?"

"No, Maam."

“Well, you can sit here on the porch and watch for your Uncle, while I fetch us a small bite to eat.”

Alone, Isabelle’s thoughts raced when she saw the Glades Runner just a speck in the distance. What to do? What to do? If I really hurry, I could catch up to Captain Zeke’s boat and he’ll take me back home. She fled around the porch corner, down the steps, and toward the twin wheel ruts through the tall weeds. The uneven ground caused her to stumble and trip again and again. Tired and out-of-breath, she dropped down to her knees to rest.

Then Isabelle saw some large rocks along the shore and thought they might give her a better view. Perched on top of the largest rock, she heard the sound of approaching footsteps. Who might that be? Maybe the bad men those gentlemen were talking about? Her sudden movement to get down and hide in the tall grass sent her shrieking into the shallow water.

She heard the saw grass scrunched down by rapid footsteps and before she had time to get to her feet, strong arms grasped her around the waist and lifted her to firm ground. She stood dripping water and covered with muck. She tasted the salty tears that ran down her cheeks. She could contain them no longer. Her heart pounded within her as she gasped for breath.

Wiping the muck and tears from Isabelle’s face with his hanky, her rescuer revealed a freckled nose and cheeks beneath pale blue eyes. “Isabelle?”

Hearing her name from this stranger, she stared back at eyes as blue and questioning as her own. “Uncle Arden?”

“Yes. I’m sorry I wasn’t at the dock to meet you. I never received word you were coming. Captain Zeke met me on the lake and I came as quickly as I could. None too soon I see.”

He removed his over-shirt and wrapped it around her shoulders, picked her up in his arms and headed back towards SAMs. Isabelle leaned into the warmth of his chest. Uncle Arden whispered, “With your pluck, you’ll get along here just fine. Tomorrow I’ll show you around your new home, Belle.” She smiled at the nickname. Belle. She liked it. Though far from the only home she had ever known, she felt safe at last.