

# *The Moving Picture Girls Under the Palms*

*or*

## *Lost in the Wilds of Florida*

By

Laura Lee Hope

Chapter 5: Disabled



Panics start so easily, especially at the mere mention of the word “fire,” that it is no wonder there was at once an incipient one aboard the Tarsus. But the captain, who was a veteran, acted promptly and efficiently.

Some of the sailors had made a rush for the boats, but the captain, coming down from the bridge on the run, flung himself in front of the excited men. He pushed one or two of them aside so violently that they fell to the deck. Then the commander, in a voice that rang out above the startled calls, cried out:

“Get back, you cowards! If we do take to the boats it will be women and children first! But we’re not going to! Stop that noise!”

His hand went, with an unmistakable gesture, to his pocket. Perhaps he was about to draw a weapon, but there was no need.

His ringing words, the lash of “coward,” that cut like a knife, and his bearing, had an immediate effect.

“Stop those shouts of ‘fire!’” he cried, and the excited men and women became quiet.

“Now get back to your places—every one of you!” he ordered the sailors. “You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, to leave your mates to answer the fire call alone,” and he pointed to where a number of hands were about the hatchway, from which smoke was still coming. But the wind was taking it away from the ship now, which was the reason why the vessel had been turned around.

“Get to your quarters!” the captain commanded, and the men slunk away. The danger of a panic was over—at least for the time.

Ruth and Alice stood where they had risen from their steamer chairs, their hands clasped, and Alice had thrust her rosy palm into the broad one of Paul. He held it reassuringly.

“Oh, what shall we do?” murmured Ruth.

“There isn’t another ship in sight,” added Alice, as she looked about the horizon.

“We can call one soon enough,” said Paul. “They’ll start the wireless if they have to.”

Mr. DeVere came hurrying up, his eyes searching about for his daughters. A look of relief came over his face as he saw them.

“You had better go below, and get what things you can save while there is time,” he said, hoarsely. “We may have to take to the boats any minute.”

“Listen, the captain is going to say something,” warned Paul.

Nearly all the passengers were now gathered on deck, as were most of the sailors, but the latter were engaged in fighting the fire through the forward hatchway. Those who were not needed at that particular place were at the other fire stations, in readiness for any emergency.

The Tarsus now lay motionless on the ocean, rolling to and fro slowly under the influence of a gentle swell. There was scarcely any wind, and the smoke, which had constantly grown thicker and blacker, even with the efforts made to subdue the flames, arose in a straight pillar of cloud.

“There is no danger!” began the captain, and there were a few murmurs at these rather trite words under the circumstances.

“I mean just what I say!” went on the commander, and there was no mistaking his sincerity. “There is no danger—at present,” he continued. “There is a slight fire among the cargo in one of the small forward holds. But it is cut off from the rest of the ship by fire-proof doors, and we are flooding that compartment. The fire will be out shortly, I expect.

“So there is absolutely no need of taking to the boats. Later on, if there should be, I will give you ample warning, and I might add that we carry a sufficient complement of boats and life rafts to accommodate all. And should we take to the boats, the weather is in our favor. So you see you should not worry.”

“But suppose we have to take to the boats at night?” asked Mr. Sneed, who seemed to have the faculty for hitting on the most unhappy aspect of any situation.

“The fire cannot possibly get beyond control before morning, even if it is not put out,” the captain replied. “So there will be no need of boats in the night. Even if there were, we have powerful searchlights, and each boat carries her own storage battery lighting plant. Now, please be reasonable.”

His words had a calming effect, and those who had rushed up to take to the boats now began to disperse.

Russ, who had come on deck with Mr. De Vere, was seen talking to Mr. Pertell. As the two advanced toward Ruth and Alice the girls heard Russ saying:

“I’m going to make moving pictures of the fire scenes.”

“A good idea!” commented Mr. Pertell. “If the captain will let you.”

“I’ll ask him.”

Captain Falcon, after a moment of consideration, agreed that the young operator might take views showing the fire-fighters at work.

“I wish I had had it going when they made that rush for the boat, though,” Russ said.

“I am glad you did not,” returned the captain, gravely. “I would not have an audience see what cowards some of my men were to so far forget themselves. That is better forgotten. Doubtless they were mad with fear. But I am glad you did not get that picture.”

Russ, however, might be pardoned for still wishing he had it, for he had the true instinct of a moving picture operator—he wanted to get everything possible.

He now set up his camera in different parts of the ship, and made a number of separate views. The black smoke would come out particularly well on the film, he knew.

The men were shown at their various stations, and of those at the hatchway where the smoke came up, several different views were made. Captain Falcon was also shown, directing the fire-fighting.

In order to cut off the draft from the fire the hatchway had been covered with heavy tarpaulins, the hose being put through holes cut in them.

There was some relaxation of the tension following the captain's little speech, but even yet there were serious faces among the passengers, as the volume of smoke seemed to grow instead of diminish. Captain Falcon, too, was observed to be laboring under a strain.

"I wonder if it is true—as he says—that there is no danger?" observed Alice, as she, Paul and Ruth walked about uneasily, pausing now and then to observe the men at work.

"Oh, I think so," answered Paul, quickly. "He would have no object in deceiving us, and let matters go so long that it would be necessary to take a risk in getting to the boats. If he did that he might be censured by the owners. I think he really believes there is no danger. And when he thinks otherwise he will give us ample warning."

"Let us hope so," murmured Mr. De Vere. "Fire is a terrible element—terrible, and at sea there is nothing more awful! I trust we may be spared from it."

"Let's go see if the wireless is working," suggested Ruth. "It will take our minds off the fire to know that help is being called for—and perhaps on the way."

"Yes, it is working," announced Alice, as they drew near the quarters occupied by the wireless operator and heard the spiteful snapping of the notched wheel of the spark-gap apparatus.

They looked in and saw the operator with the telephone receivers on his ears, while with nervous fingers he pressed the key that made and broke the circuit, thus sending out from the wire aerials between the masts the dots and dashes that, flying through the air, were received on other aerials and translated from meaningless clicks into words fraught with meaning.

“I must get a picture of that, too,” observed Russ, as he came up behind Paul, Ruth and Alice. “May I?” he asked of the captain, who, at that moment came to give an order.

“Yes,” nodded the commander. And while the vivid blue spark shot from the revolving wheel to the connection, where it was made and interrupted as the operator pressed the key, or allowed it to spring up, Russ made a short film. The young man who was sending a message looked up as he finished and smiled at the group observing him.

“I got that smile, too,” Russ informed him.

“Did you get any reply?” asked Captain Falcon, as the operator removed the receivers in order to hear the commander’s question.

“The Bell, of the Downing Line, is within fifty miles of us,” the operator replied. “She can come up when we need her.”

“I don’t think we shall,” the captain said. “But kindly ask her to stand by during the night.”

“Then the fire isn’t altogether under control?” asked Paul.

“Not as much so as I would like to see it,” answered the commander, frankly. “But we are keeping at it.”

He wrote out the message he wished sent to the Bell, and then the little audience gathered again at the door of the wireless room to watch the operator at work.

Russ made films as long as the daylight lasted, but finally the coming of night forced him to stop, and he put away his camera.

The fighting of the fire still went on, though little of it could be observed now. There were no flames to be seen, but doubtless, down in the hold, where the cargo burned, there were angry, red tongues of fire. But the compartment was kept closed. It was now nearly full of water, the captain reported, and the fire must soon be extinguished.

“Unless it has crept to another compartment,” ventured Mr. Sneed.

“Hush! Don’t let anyone hear you say such things!” cried Russ, indignantly.

Dinner was not a very cheerful meal, but all managed to eat something. And the night was an uneasy one. What sleep there was came only in catnaps, for there was the constant noise of the pumps, and the running about of the sailors on the decks.

The Tarsus was still motionless, save only as she rolled with the sea, which was still calm. Captain Falcon found that to proceed would be to drive the smoke aft into the cabins, and he did not want to do this. So he had the main engines shut down.

Through the night the fire was fought, and in the morning it was a gray and haggard captain who faced the anxious group of passengers gathered in the main saloon.

“What is the report?” asked Mr. Pertell.

“Not very encouraging,” was the answer. “We are now disabled, and the fire is still burning.”