

The Moving Picture Girls Under the Palms
or

Lost in the Wilds of Florida

By

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Chapter 24: The Lost Are Found



“What does it mean?”

“A boat at last!”

“Human beings, anyhow!”

Thus came the excited calls from those in the rowing craft, as it drifted toward the hut on shore—a palm leaf hut that seemed crudely made. Russ and Paul had ceased rowing at the sight of the motor boat, and now their own craft was merely drifting.

“Hurry up, there!” begged Alice. “There must be someone on shore who can put us on the right path. Oh, what a relief!”

“Isn’t it!” agreed Ruth, with tears in her eyes. But they were tears of joy, now.

“This came in the nick of time,” murmured Russ to Paul. “I was about ready to give up.”

“Yes?” agreed Paul, half-questioningly. “And yet isn’t it queer we don’t see some sign of life?” he asked, in a low voice. “We have made noise enough, but no one has come out of that hut. And the hut itself doesn’t seem like a very permanent sort of residence; does it?”

“Indeed it doesn’t,” spoke Russ. “But it may be one just put up for a night or two by a hunter. Anyhow, we’ll soon find out what it means, and if anyone is there who can tell us which way to go.”

He and Paul resumed their rowing and a little later were close beside the moored motor boat. It was a large craft, and well appointed, though now it showed signs of being weather-beaten; it was scratched and marred. But it seemed to be in good running order.

“Ahoy there!” called Russ, as he made fast their own boat. “Ahoy in the hut!”

There was no answer.

“Maybe they’re asleep,” suggested Ruth.

“We can apologize for waking them up,” said Alice. “Oh, to think we have help at last!”

Russ and Paul looked at each other. They were not quite so sure, now, in view of the silence, that help was at hand.

Still, the fact that the boat was tied showed that it had not merely drifted to the spot. Some human agency must have been about at some time or other.

With Russ and Paul in the lead the little party made their way to the palm leaf hut. It was ingeniously made—a glance showed that. A palm tree had been taken for the centre pole, and about this had been tied layer after layer of palm leaves, so laid as to shed the rain.

The hut was circular, and at the outer edge of the roof poles had been driven into the ground to support it. There was a small opening, which necessitated stooping to enter, and this doorway, if such it could be called, was covered by a sort of curtain of palm leaves, made in layers and fastened together with withes and wild leaves, laced in and out.

“Quite a piece of work!” commented Paul. “Now I wonder how one is to knock at a palm leaf door?”

“Don’t knock—call,” suggested Russ, and, raising his voice, he fairly shouted:

“Is anyone here?”

There was no answer.

“I wonder if it would be impolite to open the door, or the curtain, and look in?” suggested Alice.

“Under the circumstances—I think not,” answered Mrs. Maguire. “We need help, and this is the first sign we have seen of it.”

Russ stepped forward, and, after a moment of hesitation lifted the curtain of palm leaves. The interior of the hut was rather dark, and, for a moment he could see nothing.

“Anyone there?” asked Paul.

“Not a soul,” was the disappointing reply. “It’s empty.”

“Oh, dear!” sighed Alice.

“What are we to do?” Ruth wanted to know.

No one could answer her. Russ was busy making a more thorough examination of the interior of the hut.

“It’s a good place to stay—if we have to,” he said to Paul, who had joined him inside.

“And it looks as though we’d have to—eh?”

“I’m afraid so.”

Russ fastened the palm curtain back and this let in more light. Then the others came up, though there was not room for them all inside. The hut would hold three comfortably—no more.

“Who has been here?”

“What sort of a hut is it?”

“Has anyone been here lately?”

Ruth, Alice, and Mrs. Maguire, in turn, asked these questions.

“I don’t know who has been here,” said Russ, “but it’s the sort of a hut a native might build—possibly a Seminole Indian. Or some hunters may have it to stay a few nights in a spot where they could get alligators, or whatever game they were after. The fact that the boat is here seems to show they haven’t gone for good.”

“Oh, then they may come back!” cried Ruth.

“Very likely to, I should say,” spoke Russ. “We’ll just stick around until they do.”

“I hope they come back before dark,” ventured Ruth, and her sister echoed the wish.

A closer examination of the hut showed two rude bunks, made of sticks, raised slightly above the surface of the ground. The bunks were covered with thick layers of Spanish moss, and were evidently far from being uncomfortable. A few blankets showed that the occupants did not lack for a little comfort.

There were a few cooking utensils scattered about, and outside, the ashes of a camp fire, made between stones—a sort of oven—showed how the meals were prepared. But there was little evidence of food, save a few empty tins.

“There are evidently two persons staying here,” observed Russ, as he looked at a packing box, which served as a table, and noted two tin plates, and two knives, forks and spoons. “It must be real jolly, camping this way.”

“I’d rather have a tent,” said Paul. “This palm leaf hut looks artistic, and all that, but not very secure.”

“It’s secure enough in good weather,” declared Russ. “Well, I guess the only thing to do is to wait until these folks come back. They won’t remain away all night, I hardly think.”

“But if they don’t come back until dark, what shall we do?” asked Ruth. “We can’t stay out all night again.”

“We may have to,” declared practical Alice.

“That is so, and we may as well face the issue,” said Russ, somewhat gravely. “And now that we have found a sign of human beings, who can possibly tell us which way to go to find the steamer, it would be foolish to waste this chance. If we go off by ourselves again we may get farther and farther away from the Magnolia.”

“That is so,” agreed Paul. “I think we had better stay.”

“That’s what I say!” exclaimed Mrs. Maguire. “It seems like company just to look at that boat and the hut, and to know that someone has been here lately, and will come back.”

“Oh, they’ll be sure to come back,” Russ said. “That’s is too good a boat to abandon. Why, it must be worth a thousand dollars.”

He and Paul went down to examine it, while the moving picture girls and Mrs. Maguire looked about the hut.

“It seems almost like home, after what we have been through,” remarked Ruth.

“I wish there was something to eat here,” said Alice, after a stroll about the vicinity of the hut. “Whoever lives here must get their supplies in from day to day, and eat them all up.”

“Or they may be out after supplies now,” added Mrs. Maguire.

The shadows were lengthening, but the sun was still bright, and it would not be night for several hours. There was a period of anxious waiting.

“I wonder if we hadn’t better shout again, and fire a few shots?” remarked Paul. “We may be near our own steamer now, though it doesn’t seem so. We might be in another country, for all we can tell.”

“I believe we will give a few signals,” agreed Russ. “And I can spare a couple of cartridges. I only wish I could see something worth eating to shoot at. Then I could be killing two birds with one stone—giving a signal and providing a meal.”

But there seemed no suitable mark for the weapon to be aimed at, and, after they had united their voices in a chorus of calls, Russ fired twice—at intervals.

Then came a period of anxious waiting and silence.

“Call once more,” suggested Ruth.

“Hark!” exclaimed Alice, raising her hand to add to her injunction, for Russ had been about to speak. “I heard something.”

They all listened intently.

“There it is again!” whispered Alice.

Unmistakably now they all heard voices calling—voices that increased in intensity—coming nearer.

“Oh, they’ve found us! They’ve found us!” half sobbed Ruth.

“Call again, boys—I—I can’t,” faltered Alice.

Russ and Paul shouted.

Again came an unmistakable answer. Now was heard a crashing in the underbrush that told of the approach of someone, and, a moment later there came into view, on the far side of the clearing, where stood the palm leaf hut, two girls, one with a gun over her shoulder, and the other with a brace of birds hanging from her waist.

The two girls stopped for a moment, and then, with joyful shouts, rushed forward.

As for our friends, they seemed paralyzed with astonishment. It was so different from what they had expected. Then Alice found her voice, and cried:

“The two lost girls—we have found them!”