

The Moving Picture Girls Under the Palms
or

Lost in the Wilds of Florida

By

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Chapter 3: A Disquieting Item



“Man the falls!”

This order was given by one of the officers as the boat containing the rescued actor came close to the ship’s side. The sailors stood ready to hoist the boat to the davits again, when the tackle blocks should have been made fast by the hooks to the ring bolts at bow and stern.

“Best chance I ever had to get a rescue picture,” remarked Russ, as he reeled away at the film.

The young operator even managed to get in a favorable position, and take views as the blocks were being made fast to the boat. Then, as it was hoisted up, he pictured that.

“Is he all right?” asked Mr. Pertell of the sailors in the boat, when the craft was raised to the level of the rail.

“Aye, aye, sir,” answered the steersman. “Only a bit wet.”

But Mr. Towne was more than a bit wet. He was completely soaked, and a more bedraggled-looking specimen of humanity would be hard to find.

“Oh, the poor man!” exclaimed Ruth, who had thought better of her determination to go below.

“It’s his own fault,” snapped Miss Pennington. “He should not have carried on so.”

“Well, it was partly our fault,” interposed Miss Dixon, who was perhaps more just. “We were laughing with him.”

“Don’t go too close!” cautioned Miss Pennington, as she saw her friend advancing toward the group of sailors, and others who surrounded the rescue party. They were helping Mr. Towne out of the boat.

“Why shouldn’t I go close?” Laura wanted to know.

“You might get your dress wet. Mine spots terribly.”

“Oh, so does mine. I forgot; and sea water stains so badly!”

So the two actresses drew away.

“There, I guess that will do,” remarked Russ, as he saw that there was no more film left in the camera. “Now, Mr. Pertell, you’ll have to get some story written around these scenes. Add more to them, and you’ll have a good reel.”

“I’ll do it, Russ. I’m glad you were here to take them, so long as it did not turn out seriously.”

“Do you—er—ah—mean to say that you filmed me?” demanded the dudish actor, who had overheard this colloquy.

“I got some pictures of you—yes,” admitted Russ. “I couldn’t resist the temptation.”

“I demand that those pictures be destroyed!” cried Mr. Towne, who seemed to have recovered rapidly from his unexpected bath.

“What for?” asked Mr. Pertell, in surprise. “I haven’t seen them, of course—can’t until they’re developed, and that won’t be for some time. But I should say the rescue pictures would make a fine film.”

“But I want it burned up. I won’t have it shown!” insisted Mr. Towne.

“Why not?”

“Do you suppose for one instant—er, ah—that I am going to let the public see me like this?” and Mr. Towne glanced at his wet and dripping garments—garments that, but a short time ago, had been a walking testimonial of the tailor’s art. Now they were wet and misshapen.

“Why, you can’t expect a man who has just been rescued from New York Bay to look as though he came out of a band-box; can you, dear man?” asked Mr. Pertell. “Of course you look wet—the public will expect to see you wet—dripping with water, in fact. Water always comes out well in the movies, anyhow. Of course the public wants to see you wet!”

“But I don’t want them to!” protested the actor. “I have never been shown in pictures except when I was well dressed, and I do not propose to begin now. I will pose for you as soon as I get dry clothes on, but not in—these!” and he made a despairing motion toward his ruined garments.

“Oh, you are too fussy!” laughed Mr. Pertell. “Those pictures will have to go. The scene was too good to spoil, as long as you were not drowned.”

“I was in no danger of drowning,” returned Mr. Towne, coldly. “I am a good swimmer. I was taken by surprise, that is all.”

“Well, it made good pictures,” declared the manager, indifferently.

“Too bad I couldn’t get you just as you went overboard!” sighed Russ. “I was taken by surprise, too; but I did the best I could. We can have you do that part over.”

“Never!” cried Mr. Towne, angrily. “I will never be seen in an undignified position again, nor in clothes that have not been freshly pressed,” and he stalked away toward his stateroom.

“I can sympathize with you, my dear fellow,” murmured Mr. Bunn, who was as careful of his dignity, in a way, as was the other. “They have made me do the most idiotic things in some of the dramas,” the older man went on. “I have had to play fireman, and ride in donkey carts, slide down hill and all such foolishness—all to the great detriment of my dignity.”

“Yes, this moving picture business is horrid,” agreed Mr. Towne, who was dripping water at every step. “But what is a chap to do? I tried the other sort of drama—on the stage, you know; but I did not seem to have the temperament for it.”

“Ah, would that I were back again, treading the boards in my beloved Shakespeare, instead of in this miserable moving picture acting,” sighed the tragedian.

The excitement caused by the mishap to Mr. Towne soon subsided. The steamer got on her way again, once the small boat had been hoisted up, and several tugs and motor craft that had gathered to give aid, if needed, went on their courses.

“Well, that’s something for a start,” remarked Alice, as she walked the deck with Ruth.

“Yes, I knew something would happen,” spoke Mr. Sneed, gloomily. “I felt it coming.”

“How could you?” asked Paul, winking at Russ.

“Because to-day is Friday. Something always happens on Friday.”

“Yes, we generally have fish for dinner,” remarked Russ, with a twinkle in his eyes.

“You may laugh,” sneered the gloomy actor, “but the day is not over yet. I am sure that something else will happen. The ship may sink before it gets to Florida.”

“Oh!” cried Ruth.

“Don’t be silly!” laughed Alice, while Russ gave Mr. Sneed a meaning look and remarked in a low voice:

“That’s enough of such talk, old man. It gets on the girls’ nerves. Why can’t you be cheerful?”

“I never am—on Friday,” grumbled Mr. Sneed.

“No, and on very few other days,” commented Russ, as he went below to take the film out of his camera in readiness to ship it back to New York for development.

Ruth and Alice had done much traveling with their father when he was engaged in the legitimate drama, for he was with a number of road companies, that went from place to place. Water journeys were, however, rather a novelty to them, and now that the excitement of the rescue was over they went about the ship, looking at the various sights.

The Tarsus was not a big vessel, but it was a new and substantial craft engaged in the coast trade. A fairly large passenger list was carried and, as this was the winter season, many tourists were heading for the sunny South—the warm beaches of the coast, or the interior where the palms waved their graceful branches in the orange-scented breezes.

“How is your throat, Daddy?” asked Ruth, as Mr. DeVere joined his daughters in a stroll about the deck.

“Much better, I think,” he said. His voice was always hoarse now, totally unlike the vibrant tones in which he was used to speak his lines. “The pain seems less. I have hopes that the warm air of Florida may improve, and even cure it, in connection with the medicine I am taking.”

“Oh, wouldn’t that be just great!” cried Alice, as she clasped her arms about his neck. “Perhaps you could go back to the real theaters then, Daddy.”

“I might,” he replied with a smile at her; “but I do not know that I would. I am beginning to like this silent ‘drama.’ It is a rest from the hard work we old actors used to have to do. There is much less strain. And if I went back to the legitimate, I would have to take you with me,” he added.

“Never, Daddy!” cried the younger girl. “I am going to remain with the ‘movies’! I would be lost without them.”

“Assuredly, they have been a great blessing to us,” observed Ruth, quietly. “I do not know what we would have done without them, when you were stricken the second time,” and she looked fondly at her father. She thought of the dark days, not so far back, when troubles seemed multiplying, when there was no money, and when debts pressed. Now all seemed sunshine.

“Yes, it would be a poor return to the movies, to desert them after all they did for us,” agreed Mr. DeVere. “That is, as long as they care for us —those audiences who sit in the dark and watch us play our little parts on the lighted canvas. A queer proceeding—very queer.

“I little dreamed when I first took up the profession immortalized by Shakespeare, that I would be playing to persons whom I could not see. But it is certainly a wonderful advance.”

Down the bay, out through the Narrows and so on out to sea passed the Tarsus, carrying the moving picture players. The day was cold, and a storm threatened, but soon the frigid winter of the North would be left behind. This was a comforting thought to all, though Alice declared that she liked cold weather best.

Mr. Towne came up on deck, again faultlessly attired. His unexpected bath had not harmed him, in spite of the fact that it was cold, for he had at once taken warm drinks, and been put to bed, for a time, in hot blankets.

He could talk of nothing, however, save the fact that he was to be shown in the wet clothing he so despised.

“It is a shame!” he declared. “If I could find that film I would destroy it myself.”

“It is safely put away,” laughed Russ.

The day passed, and evening came. On through the darkness forged the Tarsus, while about her were the flashing beams from lighthouses, or the bobbing signal lamps from other ships.

Ruth and Alice were in their stateroom, talking together before retiring. Alice had that day's paper and was idly glancing over it. She yawned sleepily, when an item suddenly caught her eye.

"Oh, dear!" she exclaimed. "That must be dreadful!"

"What is it?" asked Ruth, who was letting down her long hair.

"Why here's an item from some place in Florida. It says that two girls went out in a motor boat, to gather specimens of rare swamp flowers, and have not been heard of since. It is feared they may have been upset and drowned, or that alligators attacked them. Oh, how dreadful!"

"Don't let Mr. Sneed hear about that," cautioned Ruth. "Where in Florida was it?"

"The item is dated from Winterhaven, but it says that the girls started from some place near Lake Kissimmee."

"Oh!" cried Ruth, pausing with the comb half way through a thick strand of hair, "suppose it should be those two girls we met?"

"I don't imagine it could be," reasoned Alice. "They did not look like girls who would be bold enough to go off after swamp blooms. But think of the poor girls, whoever they are, out all alone at night, with maybe alligators around their boat! Oh, I hope we don't have to go too far into the wilds."

"We may," remarked Ruth, uneasily, as she reached for the paper to read for herself the disquieting item.