

The Moving Picture Girls Under the Palms
or

Lost in the Wilds of Florida

By

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Chapter 4: Fire on Board



Ruth sat for some moments in silence after she had read in the paper the short account of the missing girls. She had come to a pause in arranging her luxuriant hair for the night and, with it only half combed, leaned back in the small chair the stateroom afforded. Alice was reclining on her berth.

“Does it worry you, Ruth?” the younger girl finally asked.

“A little, yes.” Ruth was unusually quiet, and there was a far-away look in her deep blue eyes.

“Oh, don’t take it so seriously,” rallied Alice, in her vivacious way, though at first she, too, had been affected by what she read.

“But it is serious.”

“Oh, it may be only one of those ‘newspaper yarns,’ as Russ calls them.”

“Alice, your language, of late —”

“There, sister mine! Please don’t scold—or lecture. I’m too sleepy,” and she finished with a yawn that showed all her white, even teeth.

“I’m not scolding, my dear, but you know I must look after you in a way, and—”

“Look after yourself, my dear. With your hair down that way, and that sweet and innocent look on your face, and in your eyes—you are much more in need of looking after than I. Someone is sure to fall in love with you, and then—”

“Alice, if you—”

“Don’t throw that hair brush at me!” and the younger girl covered herself with a quilt, in simulated fear. “I—I didn’t mean it. I’ll be good!” and she shook with laughter.

Ruth could not but smile, though the serious look did not leave her face. She was very like her father. The least little matter out of the ordinary affected him, and usually on the sad, instead of on the “glad” side. He, like Ruth, was of a romantic type, inclined to anticipate too much. Alice was more matter of fact, not to say frivolous, though she could be very sensible at times.

“Well, I suppose we must go to bed,” sighed Ruth at length. “But I’m afraid I sha’n’t sleep.”

“On account of thinking of those girls?”

“Yes, just imagine them out all alone in some dismal swamp, perhaps, without a light, hungry—afraid of every sound—”

“Please stop! You’re getting on my nerves.”

“I didn’t mean to, my dear,” was the gentle answer.

“I know you didn’t, and it was mean of me to talk that way,” and a plump, bare arm stole around the other’s neck, while a hand was run through the golden hair. “But, don’t let’s think so much about them. Perhaps they are not those two girls we met, after all.”

“Oh, I don’t believe they can be,” Ruth agreed. “That would be too much of a coincidence. But they are two girls —”

“Not necessarily. Maybe it’s only an unfounded rumor. Russ says newspaper men often ‘plant’ a story like this off in some obscure place, and then use it as the basis for one of those lurid stories in the Sunday supplements.

“I shouldn’t wonder a bit but what this was one of those cases. So, sister mine, go to sleep in peace, and in the morning you’ll have forgotten all about it. Only don’t let’s tell any one, for some of the company, like Mr. Sneed, might make trouble for Mr. Pertell, saying alligators were there.”

“Well, there are.”

“Perhaps. But who cares? I’d like to get one ordinary-sized ‘gator.”

“Why, Alice! What for?”

“I’ve always wanted an alligator bag, and I never could afford it. Now’s my chance. But we may never get far enough into the interior for that. By the way, where did it say those girls started from? I didn’t half read it.”

“From Sycamore, near Lake Kissimmee.”

“Well, Mr. Pertell did mention that we might get to the lake, but he didn’t specify Sycamore.”

“No, and now I’m going to try and do as you said, and forget all about it,” and Ruth laid aside the paper and resumed putting up her hair for the night.

“I wonder what will happen to-morrow?” mused Alice, as she slipped into her robe, and thrust her feet into bath slippers.

“What do you mean?” Ruth’s voice was rather muffled, for her hair was over her face now.

“I mean Mr. Towne fell in to-day, and—”

“Gracious, I hope you don’t infer that it’s someone else’s turn to-morrow!”

“Hardly!” laughed Alice. “Hand me that cold cream, please, the salt air has chapped my face. Oh, say, did you notice how much color Laura had on to-day? If ever there was a ‘hand-made’ complexion hers was!”

“You shouldn’t say such things!”

“Why not? When they’re true! And such eyes as she made at poor Mr. Towne!”

Ruth slipped a rosy palm over her sister’s lips, but Alice pulled it away, and laughingly added:

“She found that her glances failed to reach Paul, and so she’s trying her ‘wireless’ on—”

“Alice, you must stop. Someone may hear you!”

“Can’t! Daddy has the stateroom on one side, and Mr. Pertell the other, and they’re both sound sleepers. But I’ve finished anyhow. You put out the light,” and with a bound, having completed her toilette, Alice was in her berth.

Ruth sighed, and then sat again staring off into space. It must have been some little time, too, for when she turned to look at her sister, Alice was breathing deeply in sleep.

“Dear Alice!” murmured Ruth, and she bent over her for a moment, and kissed her lightly on the cheek—as gently as the fall of a rose petal. Soon the older sister, too, was asleep.

In order that there might be no trouble among the members of the moving picture company over the statement made in the newspaper that perhaps the two girls had fallen victims to alligators, Ruth, next morning, carefully cut out the item, and put it away among her things.

“It may be silly,” she said to Alice, “but—”

“It is silly to imagine anything like that,” was the quick retort.

“But it’s best to be on the safe side,” finished Ruth, gently. “Mr. Sneed is so peculiar.”

“I agree with you there, sister mine. Well, you’ve taken the precautions, anyhow. My, I’m hungry! I hope breakfast is ready.”

“You are not troubled with mal-de-mer, then?”

“Not a bit of it, and I never was out on the ocean before. It isn’t a bit rough; is it?”

“Well, we did roll some during the night, but then the sea is calm. Wait until we get a storm.”

“I do hope one comes!”

“Alice DeVere!”

“Well, I mean just a little one, with waves like little hills, instead mountains.”

The only members of the film company who did not present themselves at the breakfast table were Miss Pennington and Miss Dixon.

They breakfasted in their staterooms, but it was noticed that the trays came out about as well filled as they went in, from which it might be gathered that they were not altogether free from the toll the sea exacts from most travelers.

“My, how charming you look!” observed Paul to Alice as he joined her on deck, and arranged her steamer chair out of the wind. She had on a new jacket, and a little toque, the brown fur of which matched her eyes, and brought out, in contrast, the damask of her cheeks.

“Thank you,” she laughed in retort. “I might say the same of you. That’s a good-looking coat.”

“A little different from the usual, yes. The man said it was imported—”

“Just as if that made it any better.”

“It doesn’t—only different. Where did you get that rug? It’s an odd pattern.”

“My! But the compliments are flying this morning. It’s one daddy picked up somewhere. Isn’t the weather glorious?”

“Now we’re on a safe topic,” laughed Paul. “Here come Russ and Ruth. My, but she’s stunning!”

“I’m glad you appreciate her,” Alice said. Really, Ruth made a picture, for she had on a long white cloak, and with a turban trimmed with ermine, and her fair hair and blue eyes, she looked like some Siberian princess, if they have princesses there, and I suppose they must.

The four young people chatted and laughed together, while the Tarsus plowed on her way. It was a day of idleness, save that Russ took a few pictures of scenes on shipboard for future use.

In the afternoon, while Ruth and Alice were reclining luxuriously in their steamer chairs, they observed one of the officers come up from below, and run toward the bridge. There was something in his manner that startled Alice, and she sat up suddenly, exclaiming:

“I hope nothing has happened!”

“Happened? Why should it? What do you mean?” asked Ruth. But immediately a look of fear came into her own eyes—a look born of suggestion merely.

“Oh, I don’t know,” and Alice tried to laugh, but it did not ring true. “It was just a notion—”

She did not finish, for another officer came on the run from forward, and he, too, sought the bridge. Then the two girls saw curling up from one of the hatchways on the lower forward deck, a little wisp of smoke, and immediately afterward there sounded through the ship the clanging of bells.

“What’s that?” cried Ruth, casting aside her rug, and struggling to her feet, no easy matter from a steamer chair. “What’s that?”

“Some alarm,” said Alice, faintly.

Paul came running toward them.

“Oh, what is it?” gasped Ruth, impulsively clasping him by the arm.

“Don’t be frightened,” said Paul, but Alice noticed that his lips trembled a little. “It’s only a—fire drill.”

As he spoke there was an outpouring of sailors from many places, and lines of hose were reeled out.

The wisp of smoke from the forward hatchway had increased now, though the hatch cover was on.

Up on the bridge the girls could see the captain leaving his post in charge of one of the officers. The ship, too, seemed to be turning about.

“Are you sure it is only fire—drill?” asked Alice.

“Why, that’s what a sailor told me,” answered Paul, slowly.

“Look,” said Alice, and she pointed to the curling smoke.

More clanging bells resounded, and more lines of hose were run out. There was no doubt, now, that the Tarsus was making a complete turn.

Then, as the captain and one officer left the bridge there rang out the cry: “Fire! Fire! The ship’s on fire! Lower the boats!”