

# *The Moving Picture Girls Under the Palms*

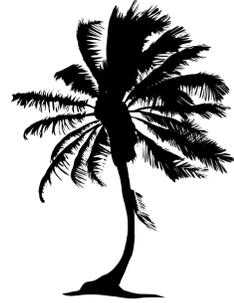
*or*

## *Lost in the Wilds of Florida*

By

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Chapter 13: Out in the Boat



Ruth and Alice looked at each other. It seemed almost impossible that there could be this confirmation of the news item they had read, and so soon after arriving at the hotel. Yet such was the fact.

“Does any one know what has become of them?” asked Alice, after a pause.

“Not the least trace of them has been found,” replied the clerk.

“Have they made any search for them?” inquired Ruth, looking over her shoulder almost apprehensively, as though she, herself, were out in some swamp, surrounded by perils of all sorts. But only the lighted parlor met her gaze.

“Search! Indeed they have!” cried the hotel man. “The parents of the girls have sent out party after party.”

“With no result?” asked Alice, softly.

“Well, they found traces where the girls had evidently landed, but that was all. They seemed to have gone deeper and deeper into the swamp.”

“How long ago was it?” Ruth wanted to know.

“Several weeks, now. It is almost impossible that the girls are alive, though they took a quantity of provisions with them, as they expected to be gone several days.”

“The poor things!” murmured Ruth. “Tell us more about them. Who are they?”

“Mabel and Helen Madison,” was the answer.

Ruth and Alice cried out in surprise.

“Those girls!” voiced Alice.

“The ones we met in the train,” added Ruth. “It seems incredible!”

“Did you know them?” asked the clerk, for the remarks and demeanor of Ruth and Alice were too marked to pass over without comment.

“We did not exactly know them,” replied Ruth, slowly. “We met them in the train when we were going to the New England backwoods to get moving pictures last winter. One of them had a headache—I think it was Helen.”

“No, it was Mabel, dear,” corrected Alice. “They seemed such nice girls.”

“They were nice!” the clerk declared. “I did not know them very well, but I have often seen them about the hotel here. Some of their friends stopped here. Their folks live just outside the town.”

“And you say they went out to get rare flowers?” asked Ruth, as she noted Miss Pennington and Miss Dixon coming into the hotel parlor.

“Yes. The girls are real outdoors girls,” went on the clerk. “They can hunt and fish, and Miss Mabel, I believe it was, once shot a big alligator.”

“Alligators! Oh, dear! Are any of the horrid things around here?” broke in Miss Dixon.

“Not right around here,” was the reassuring answer. “This was out in the swamps.”

“We are talking about two girls who have disappeared from here, and can’t be found,” explained Alice, for the story was bound to come out now.

“Oh, how perfectly dreadful!” cried Miss Pennington, as the account was completed. “We must be careful about going out alone, my dear,” she added to her friend.

“Not much danger—you’ll always want some of the men along,” thought Alice.

“What sort of flowers were they after?” Ruth wanted to know.

“Some sort of orchid,” was the hotel man’s answer. “I don’t know much about such things myself, but Mr. Madison, the girls’ father, is quite a naturalist, and I guess they take after him. He collects birds, bugs and flowers, and the girls used to help him.

“As I heard the story, he has been for a long time searching for a rare orchid that is said to grow around here. He never could find it until one day, by chance, an old colored man came in with a crumpled and wilted specimen, mixed in with some other stuff he had. Mr. Madison saw it, and grew excited at once, wanting to know where it had come from.

“The colored man told him as well as he could, and Mr. Madison decided to set off in search of this flower—if an orchid is a flower?” and the clerk looked questioningly at the girls.

“Oh, indeed it is a flower, and a most beautiful one,” Ruth assured him.

“Well, Mr. Madison was about to start off on a little expedition, when he was taken ill. He was much disappointed, as some naturalist society had offered him a big prize for a specimen of this particular plant.

“Then the girls, wishing to help their father, said they would go in search of it. They owned a good-sized motor boat, and had often gone off before, remaining several days at a time. They know how to take care of themselves.”

“That’s the kind of girls I like,” declared Alice. “It seems doubly hard on them, though, that they should be lost.”

“And lost they are,” concluded the clerk. “Not a word has been heard of them since they set off into the wilds. When they did not come back, after several days, Mr. Madison organized a searching party. But, beyond a few traces of the girls, nothing could be found.”

“We read about it in a newspaper,” said Ruth.

“Yes, there were some items, but not many,” the clerk said. “There wasn’t much to print, I guess. So I just thought I’d warn you folks not to go too far off into the swamps or bayous.”

“And you may depend upon it—we won’t!” exclaimed Miss Pennington.

“Our party will probably keep together,” explained Ruth, “as we will all be needed in the moving pictures.”

“That’s a good idea,” the clerk said. “Take no chances.”

It was not long before the entire moving picture company had heard the story of the lost girls, and there was universal sympathy for them, and for their grief-stricken parents.

“I only wish we could do something!” said Ruth, and there were tears in her eyes as she looked toward her sister. “Suppose it should be us?” she added.

“I don’t like to suppose any such horrible thing!” returned Alice, brightly. “It’s terrible, to be sure; but let’s not think too much about it. It may get on our nerves.”

“But if we could only help find them,” went on Ruth, on whom the story seemed to have made a profound impression.

“I don’t see how we can,” remarked Alice, thoughtfully. “We know nothing about the country, or conditions, here. Those who have lived here all their lives are better qualified to make a search.”

“Say, wouldn’t it be great if we could find them!” cried Russ, as he listened to the story. “What a film it would make!”

“Oh, Russ!” reproved Ruth. “To think of such a thing at this time!”

“Why, what’s the matter?” he asked, ruefully, for Ruth’s manner was a little cold toward him.

“Of course Russ naturally thinks of the picture end of it,” put in Alice, determined to soften the unintended effect of Ruth’s manner.

“I suppose so,” agreed Ruth, and she gave Russ a glance that made up for what she had said.

“I do wish we could do something,” said Paul, “but, as Alice says, it doesn’t seem possible.”

The hotel at Sycamore was nothing to boast of, but it answered fairly well as the moving picture company would be outdoors practically all the time, as Mr. Pertell pointed out. The weather was like early Summer — most delightful — and it was a temptation to wander out under the stately, graceful palms, which cast a grateful shade.

There were not many other guests at the hostelry, and interest centered in the company of players. They were asked many questions as to what they did, and how they did it, and when Russ set up his camera for the first time, merely to try it, and get the effect of light and shade, he was surrounded by a curious throng.

The scenery around Sycamore was most wonderful — at least, so Ruth and Alice thought. It was not that it was grand or imposing — for it was anything but that. Florida is a low-lying country with many lakes and swamps. But the vegetation was so luxuriant, and the palms, the big trees festooned with Spanish moss and the ferns were so beautiful, that it was a constant delight to the girls.

There are few rapid streams around the vicinity of Sycamore, most of them being sluggish to the point of swampiness. And a short distance away from the hotel, on some of the creeks and bayous, one could imagine oneself in some impenetrable jungle, so still and quiet was it.

“It will give us some new effects in moving pictures,” said Mr. Pertell. “It is just what we want.”

“How are we going to get farther into the interior?” asked Mr. De Vere, when that subject was brought up.

“I have chartered a small steamer,” said the manager. “At first I decided we could use a large motor boat, and make the trips back and forth from the hotel each day, to get to the various places. But I find that distances are longer than I calculated on, and it might be inconvenient, at times, to come back to the hotel. So I have engaged a good-sized, flat-bottomed stern-wheeler, and we can spend several days at a time on her if need be.”

“Oh, how lovely!” cried Alice, clapping her hands in girlish enthusiasm. “Won’t it be fine, Ruth?”

“It sounds enticing.”

“To think of steaming along these quiet and mysterious streams, under the palms,” exclaimed Alice. “Oh, I’m so glad I came.”

“Huh! Yes. Suppose we get lost, as those two girls are?” demanded Mr. Sneed, who was the only one, you may be sure, who would make such a disquieting suggestion.

“Well, if we’re all lost together it won’t be so bad,” declared Alice. “But I should hate to be lost all alone.”

“Don’t speak of it!” begged Ruth, with a shudder.

After two or three days of fretting, because the boat he had ordered did not come, Mr. Pertell finally received word that it was on its way up the Kissimmee River.

The Magnolia, which was the name of the steamer, arrived two days later. It proved to be an old, comfortable craft, with a wheezy engine, burning wood. At the stern was a paddle wheel, so placed because of the character of the waters to be navigated. The boat only drew about a foot, and could go in very shallow streams.

There were sleeping and cooking quarters aboard, and on the upper deck a place to promenade, or to sit in the shade of an awning.

“It’s like a house-boat!” cried Alice in delight, as she and Ruth inspected it. “Oh, I’d just like to live aboard this all the while.”

“You will be on it a good deal,” observed Russ. “We’ve got a number of dramas planned, of which the boat is the background.”