

The Moving Picture Girls Under the Palms

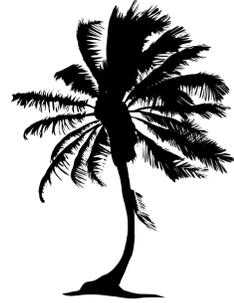
or

Lost in the Wilds of Florida

By

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Chapter 21: The Long Night



Ruth began to cry quietly—she really could not help it. Alice felt like following her example, but the younger girl had the saving grace of humor. Not that Ruth actually lacked it, but it was not so near the surface, nor so easily called into action.

“Isn’t it silly?” Alice suddenly exclaimed.

“What?” Paul wanted to know.

“Getting lost like this! It’s too funny—”

“I wish I could see it, my dear,” observed Ruth.

“Try to,” urged Mrs. Maguire. “It does seem a bit odd to be lost like this, and maybe the steamer only just around the corner.”

“Probably she is,” agreed Russ. “We must call again!”

This time they united their voices in a shout that carried far, but the only effect it had was to disturb some of the denizens of the forest.

“But what are we going to do?” queried Ruth. “We—we can’t stay here all night.”

“We may have to,” answered Russ, grimly enough.

“Oh, please don’t say that!” she faltered.

“Why, it won’t be so bad,” put in the jolly Irish woman. “We’ve got a roomy boat, thank goodness. We can lie down on the rugs, with our rubber coats for protection against the dew. We have some food left, and the moon will soon be up, for it’s clearing fast. Then, in the morning, we can find our way back to the steamer.”

“Of course!” exclaimed Paul, who realized the necessity of keeping up the spirits of the girls. “We’ll be laughing at this to-morrow.”

“Do you really think so?” asked Ruth, timorously.

“I’m sure of it,” he said. “Now let’s figure out what we’d better do.”

“How about going ashore?” suggested Russ.

“Never!” cried Ruth.

“Why not?”

“Oh, we don’t know what sort of horrid things may be in the woods. It’s safer in the boat.”

“You forget about the—” Alice began, but she did not finish. She had been about to say “manatees and alligators,” but thought better of it. Instead she changed it to:

“Well, I guess it’s about six of one and half a dozen of the other.”

“Only, don’t you think it’s better to stay in the boat?” asked Ruth.

“I suppose it is,” agreed Alice. “It will be damp on the ground, and there is very little water in the boat.”

This was so because when it rained Russ and Paul had used a heavy canvas to cover up the provisions that were left, and this shed the water over the sides of the craft.

“There’s the moon!” suddenly called Mrs. Maguire, as she saw a flash of light between the trees.

“I only wish it was the lantern of a searching party,” sighed Ruth.

“They probably will hunt for us,” said Russ. “But whether they find us before morning is another matter.”

“Well, let’s take an account of things, and see how we stand, anyhow,” suggested Paul, practically. “If we’ve got to stay here all night we might as well make ourselves as comfortable as possible.”

“Don’t you think we could keep on rowing, and perhaps find the steamer, Russ?” asked Ruth.

“I’m afraid not,” he answered. “We would only get more lost, if that is possible. No, I think the best plan is to stay right where we are, and in the morning we can look about.”

“I don’t understand how we came to get lost,” remarked Alice.

“Well, there were so many creeks and bayous that we probably took the wrong turn,” Russ answered. “We ought to have picked out a landmark, I suppose. I will next time.”

“Yes, we didn’t use as much care as we might have done,” agreed Paul.
“Well, let’s make the ladies comfortable.”

“I’m hungry, more than uncomfortable,” declared Alice.

“There are some sandwiches and other things left,” Russ told her.
“Luckily we didn’t eat all of them. And I can make coffee.”

“Then please do!” cried Ruth. “I’m cold from the rain, and it may help my nerves!”

“You shouldn’t have them, sister mine!” mocked Alice. They were all in better spirits now. The moon was higher, and gave a good illumination, being at the full.

There were some heavy rugs in the boat, having been brought along to use in the picnic scene in the woods. While Paul arranged these in the bottom of the craft, and put some cushions against the seats so that Mrs. Maguire and the two girls could lean against them, Russ prepared the coffee. A jug of drinking water had been brought along, for the water of the creeks and river was not considered good. Then, with an alcohol stove, set up on a seat, a steaming pot of coffee was soon made.

With that and sandwiches the lost ones made a meal for which they were all grateful, and in which they stood in much need.

“Oh, how good that was!” sighed Alice. “Is there any more?”

“Well,” hesitated Russ, “I was thinking perhaps we’d better save some until morning. We will want breakfast, you know.”

“Don’t you think they’ll find us—or we them—by breakfast time?” asked Ruth, apprehensively.

“It’s possible that it may not happen,” Russ answered, slowly, and his words seemed rather ominous to the two girls, at least.

“Oh, don’t worry,” advised Mrs. Maguire. “We’ll be all right, I’m sure. At the same time it might be a good plan not to eat all the food we have.”

“Oh, I agree to that!” said Alice, hastily.

“I’ll shoot a wild turkey to-morrow,” promised Paul, with a laugh. “Then we will have a real Thanksgiving feast.”

“I hope we don’t have to stay as long as that,” sighed Ruth. “Oh, how father will worry!” she said to Alice.

“Probably, but it can’t be helped. He will know we would come back if we could, and he’ll know we will take care of ourselves.”

“Still, he can’t help worrying,” insisted Ruth.

Fortunately the boat was a roomy one, and the lost ones were not as uncomfortable as might have been imagined, with the rugs and cushions and the piece of canvas, as well as their raincoats, for covering.

The craft was tied to a tree on shore, in a sort of little cove, and there the five prepared to spend the night. The moon came up higher over the trees, and shone down on the strange scene.

“I wish it were light enough for some pictures,” sighed Russ.

“Nothing much gets away from you, old man,” laughed Paul. “Are your ladies comfortable?” he asked, as he joined Russ in the bow of the boat, the other three being in the broad stern.

“Very comfortable,” answered Alice. “Only I wish we had brought a mosquito netting along. The little pests are after me with a vengeance.”

“I can build a smudge on shore, and that may keep them off,” offered Russ. “In fact, a smudge is about the only kind of a fire I could make, as everything is so damp.”

This proved to be the case. But a heavy smoke was soon floating over the boat, and this did seem to keep away the pests.

“What had we better do?” asked Russ of Paul, as they piled more damp fuel on the smudge-fire.

“Well, we’ll have to stand watch and watch, of course. And we will have the gun ready. It’s all loaded. No telling what might happen. A bobcat might take a notion to come aboard, or an alligator might nose us out. We’ll have to be on the watch.”

Little or nothing could be told about the surrounding country in the darkness, even illuminated as it was by the moon. The river stretched away in either direction, and both banks were heavily wooded.

“Br-r-r! but it’s creepy here!” sighed Ruth, as the two young men got into the boat again.

“Is that a light—a lantern—off there?” asked Alice, suddenly, as she sat up and pointed.

For a moment they all hoped that it was, and they raised their voices in shouts:

“Here we are!”

“Look for our lantern!”

Then as the other light moved about erratically Russ said:

“It’s only ignis-fatuus — will-o’-the-wisp. It’s a sort of phosphorescent glow that appears at night over swamps. I’ve seen it in rotting stumps on hot nights.”

“Too bad to disappoint you,” said Mrs. Maguire. “Now, girls, get comfortable, and we’ll be all right in the morning. Try to sleep.”

Ruth and Alice declared it was out of the question, and for a long time they remained wide awake. Mrs. Maguire, who had traveled with many road companies, and had often slept under adverse circumstances, did manage to doze off. Russ had first watch, and Paul was tired enough to fall into a slumber.

Finally Ruth and Alice also slumbered, leaning against each other, with Mrs. Maguire as partial support. Russ found his head nodding as the long night wore on.

“Come, this won’t do!” he told himself, sitting up with a jerk. But nature was insistent, and he became sleepy again. He was suddenly awakened by what seemed some horrid, human cry close to the boat.

“Oh!” screamed Ruth, startling the others into wakefulness. “What was that?”

The cry was repeated — a cry that brought a chill to the heart.