

The Moving Picture Girls Under the Palms
or

Lost in the Wilds of Florida

By

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Chapter 22: Ashore



The boat rocked and trembled under the impulse of the moving bodies—swayed so and tilted, that Russ sharply called:

“Steady all, or we’ll upset!”

“Oh!” screamed Ruth. “Never! Do be quiet, Alice!”

“I’m not moving; it’s you!”

“Quiet, girls,” called Mrs. Maguire, softly. She had really been sleeping soundly, and the sudden awakening rather confused her. “What’s it all about?” she asked.

“Oh, didn’t you hear it?” gasped Ruth. “Such a horrible cry!”

“Maybe it was some one calling to us—some of the searching party from the Magnolia,” suggested Paul.

“Let’s give an answer, then,” came from Russ.

“Magnolia ahoy!” cried Paul, and the young moving picture operator joined in with his powerful voice.

There was no answer for a moment, and all about in the black woods was silence. Off on shore glowed the faint sparks of the smudge-fire.

“They didn’t hear you,” said Alice, softly.

And then, vibrating on the night, and echoing through the trees, came that dreadful cry again; weird, long-drawn-out, a howl—a fiendish laugh, ending in a choking giggle and then a shrill whine.

“Oh—oh!” gasped Ruth, and she and Alice clung together, leaning on Mrs. Maguire.

“It’s like the wail of a lost soul,” whispered Alice.

“Sure, and it must be an Irish banshee!” murmured Mrs. Maguire. “I’ve heard my mother tell of ‘em!”

“It’s a wild beast, that’s all,” said Paul, though his voice was not steady as usual. For the cry, coming out of the darkness, perhaps from a spot where some animal crouched, ready to spring down on them, was not reassuring.

“That’s it—some animal,” added Russ. “Hand me that gun, Paul, I’ll try —”

“Oh, you’re not going after it—in the dark, are you?” interrupted Ruth.

“Not much, little girl!” he exclaimed with a laugh, which showed that his nerves were steadying. “I’m only going to try a shot to frighten it. I don’t want to be kept awake all night.”

“As if one could close an eye with that horrid creature loose in the woods,” remarked Alice.

Again came the weird cry, seemingly nearer than before.

“We ought to have a fire,” whispered Paul. “Wild animals are afraid of fire.”

“It’s too damp to build one,” remarked Russ. “The lantern will have to answer.”

The beast kept up its howling longer than usual this time. Then Russ, who had a good ear for sound, and a fine sense of location, raised the gun and fired into the darkness.

A jagged streak of flame lit up the blackness for a second, and following close after the echoes of the shot there sounded a howl that was unmistakably one of pain.

“You winged him, Russ!” cried Paul.

The howling continued.

The girls screamed. Mrs. Maguire tried to calm them.

“I believe I may have touched him,” admitted Russ, not a little proudly. “There was a big charge of shot in that cartridge, and it probably scattered. He can’t be badly hurt though, but it may make him go serenade someone else. We’ve had enough.”

The howls grew fainter, and there was a crashing in the bushes and tree limbs that told of the retreat of some creature. Finally these sounds ceased, and once more there was silence and darkness, illuminated only by the lantern and the faint glow of the smudge-fire.

“Do you really think it’s gone?” asked Ruth faintly, as she nestled closer to her sister and Mrs. Maguire.

“I hope so,” ventured Alice.

“I guess we’ve heard the last of it,” Russ assured them. “But don’t worry. We’ll be on the watch the rest of the night. I wish we could have a fire; but I’m afraid it’s out of the question.”

“Let’s try, anyhow,” suggested Paul. “It will give us something to do. I’m cold and stiff. Maybe we can find a bit of dry wood.”

“It is chilly,” complained Ruth, and she shivered. The night was cold and damp.

Nor were the piece of canvas and the raincoats much protection. Still, it was better than nothing.

“Well, we’ll try a fire,” agreed Russ, as he prepared to go ashore with Paul.

“Oh—don’t—don’t go!” begged Ruth, nervously.

“Why not?” asked the young actor.

“Because—that beast—!”

“I fancy he’s far enough off by now,” answered Russ. “A fire will be our best protection, if we can make one. Come on, Paul, let’s try it, anyhow.”

“Oh, I—I don’t like them to go,” protested Ruth.

“Silly! It’s the best thing to do,” answered Alice. “They probably need a little exercise. They haven’t so much room in their end of the boat as we have.”

“Oh, of course, I don’t want them to be uncomfortable,” returned Ruth, quickly.

Searching about with the lantern Russ and Paul managed to get enough dry wood to start a blaze. It was a tiny one at first, but as the wood dried out the flames grew apace until there was a really good camp fire.

“How’s that?” called Russ, as he dropped a pile of sticks into the flames.

“Lovely!” answered Alice.

“It isn’t half so lonesome now,” added Ruth. She tried to be cheerful—as cheerful as Alice seemed, though really both girls, in their hearts, were worrying over the effect their absence would have on their father.

“Now we’ve done this much, let’s do a little more,” suggested Paul.

“Let’s brew some coffee. I fancy the girls must be chilly. I know I am.”

“Good idea! Coffee for five!” cried Russ, as though giving orders to a restaurant waiter.

“I wouldn’t sleep, anyhow, after hearing that beast scream,” said Ruth. “Do make coffee.”

The alcohol stove was soon lighted and the aromatic odor of the hot beverage floated on the air. The little party made merry—as merry as possible under the circumstances.

The moon sank below the trees again. It grew very dark, and somehow they dozed off again—fitfully. Then a pale light suffused the east, filtering faintly through the trees. It grew brighter.

“Morning,” announced Russ, with a luxurious stretch. “It’s morning.”

“The end of the long night,” whispered Ruth. “How glad—how very glad I am.”

“Let’s all go ashore and have breakfast—that is, whatever we have left for breakfast,” proposed Alice. “It will do us all good to run about a bit.”

And soon they were all ashore, using stiffened muscles gingerly at first, and then with increasing confidence. The sun was blazing hot overhead.

“And now to find our mislaid steamer!” cried Russ, gaily.