

The Moving Picture Girls Under the Palms eBook

The Moving Picture Girls Under the Palms by Laura Lee Hope

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Contents

The Moving Picture Girls Under the Palms eBook.....	1
Contents.....	2
Table of Contents.....	6
Page 1.....	7
Page 2.....	9
Page 3.....	11
Page 4.....	13
Page 5.....	15
Page 6.....	17
Page 7.....	19
Page 8.....	21
Page 9.....	23
Page 10.....	25
Page 11.....	27
Page 12.....	29
Page 13.....	31
Page 14.....	33
Page 15.....	35
Page 16.....	37
Page 17.....	39
Page 18.....	41
Page 19.....	43
Page 20.....	45
Page 21.....	47
Page 22.....	49

Page 23.....	51
Page 24.....	53
Page 25.....	55
Page 26.....	57
Page 27.....	59
Page 28.....	61
Page 29.....	63
Page 30.....	65
Page 31.....	67
Page 32.....	69
Page 33.....	71
Page 34.....	73
Page 35.....	75
Page 36.....	77
Page 37.....	79
Page 38.....	81
Page 39.....	83
Page 40.....	85
Page 41.....	87
Page 42.....	89
Page 43.....	91
Page 44.....	93
Page 45.....	95
Page 46.....	97
Page 47.....	99
Page 48.....	101

Page 49.....	103
Page 50.....	105
Page 51.....	107
Page 52.....	109
Page 53.....	111
Page 54.....	113
Page 55.....	115
Page 56.....	117
Page 57.....	119
Page 58.....	121
Page 59.....	123
Page 60.....	125
Page 61.....	127
Page 62.....	129
Page 63.....	131
Page 64.....	133
Page 65.....	135
Page 66.....	137
Page 67.....	139
Page 68.....	141
Page 69.....	143
Page 70.....	145
Page 71.....	147
Page 72.....	149
Page 73.....	151
Page 74.....	153

Page 75.....	155
Page 76.....	157
Page 77.....	159
Page 78.....	161
Page 79.....	163
Page 80.....	165
Page 81.....	167

Table of Contents

Section	Page
Start of eBook	1
CHAPTER I	1
CHAPTER II	4
CHAPTER III	7
CHAPTER IV	11
CHAPTER V	14
CHAPTER VI	18
CHAPTER VII	21
CHAPTER VIII	24
CHAPTER IX	27
CHAPTER X	31
CHAPTER XI	34
CHAPTER XII	37
CHAPTER XIII	40
CHAPTER XIV	43
CHAPTER XV	46
CHAPTER XVI	50
CHAPTER XVII	53
CHAPTER XVIII	56
CHAPTER XIX	60
CHAPTER XX	63
CHAPTER XXI	66
CHAPTER XXII	69
CHAPTER XXIII	71
CHAPTER XXIV	74
CHAPTER XXV	78
THE END	81

Page 1

CHAPTER I

OVERBOARD

"All ready now! In position, everyone!"

Half a score of actors and actresses moved quickly to their appointed places, while overhead, and at the sides of them hissed powerful electric lights, and in front of them stood a moving picture camera, ready to be operated by a pleasant-faced young man.

"Ready?" came in questioning tones from Mr. Pertell, the stage director, as he looked sharply from one to the other.

A tall, well-built man, with iron-gray hair, nodded, but did not speak.

"Let her go, Russ!" Mr. Pertell exclaimed.

"Vait! Vait a minute!" called one of the actors, with a pronounced German accent.

"Well, what's the matter now, Mr. Switzer?" asked the director, with a touch of impatience.

"I haf forgotten der imbortant babers dot I haf to offer mine enemy in dis play. I must have der babers."

"Gracious, I should say so!" said the manager. "Where's Pop Snooks?" and he looked around for the property man, who had to produce on short notice anything from a ten-ton safe to a hairpin.

"Hi, Pop!" called Mr. Pertell. "Make up a bundle of important, legal-looking papers, with seals on. Mr. Switzer has to use 'em in this play. I forgot to tell you."

"Have 'em for you right away!" cried the property man, and a little later Mr. Switzer had his "babers."

"I guess we're all right now. Start up, Russ," ordered the stage director, who was also the manager of the troupe.

"That was a mistake on the part of Mr. Pertell; wasn't it, Ruth?" asked one of the young actresses—a pretty girl—of her sister, who stood near her in the mimic scene.

"Yes, indeed, Alice. But it isn't often he makes one."

"No, indeed. Oh, we mustn't talk any more. I see him looking at us."

“Begin!” called the manager, sharply, and the play proceeded, while the young moving picture operator clicked away at the handle of his camera, the long strip of film moving behind the lens with a whirring sound, and registering views of the pantomime of the actors and actresses at the rate of sixteen a second.

The above was done several times a day in the New York studio of the Comet Film Company, which was engaged in making moving pictures.

The play went on through the various acts. Only part of it was being “filmed” now—the interior scenes. Later, others would be taken outdoors.

“Time out—hold your positions!” suddenly exclaimed the operator. “Film’s broken. I’ve got to mend it.”

Everyone came to a standstill at that. In a few seconds the damage was repaired, and the play went on. It was, in the main, a “parlor” drama, and there were to be only a few outdoor scenes.

“That will do for the present,” said Mr. Pertell. “You may all take a rest now. This will be our last New York play for some time—that is, after we get the outdoor scenes for this.”

Page 2

"Where are we going next?" asked the elderly actor before mentioned. He spoke in very hoarse voice, and it was evident that he had some throat affection. In fact, it was the ailment which had forced him to give up acting in the "legitimate," and take to the "movies."

"We are going to Florida—the land of the palms!" announced the manager. "You know I spoke of tentative plans for a drama down there when we were in the backwoods. Now I have everything arranged, and we will leave on a steamer for St. Augustine one week from to-day."

"Hurrah for Florida!" exclaimed a young actor, with a strikingly good-looking face. "There's where I've always wanted to go."

"So have I!" exclaimed a young girl who stood near him,—a girl with merry, brown eyes. "Will you take me out after oranges, Paul?" she asked, mischievously.

"Certainly, Alice," he answered.

"Why don't you say orange blossoms while you're about it?" inquired another actress, with a pert manner.

Alice blushed, and her sister Ruth looked sharply at Miss Laura Dixon, who had made the rather pointed remark.

"I'm willing to make it orange blossoms!" laughed the young fellow. "That is, if they're in season."

"Ah, stop all this nonsense!" exclaimed Alice. "I want to ask Mr. Pertell a lot of questions about where we're going, and all that. Oh, to think we are really going to Florida!"

"Yes, we are all going," went on Mr. Pertell. "I think—"

"One moment, if you please!" interrupted a middle-aged actor whose face seemed to indicate that he lived more on vinegar than on the milk of human kindness. "We are not *all* going, if you please, Mr. Pertell."

"Who is not going, Mr. Sneed, pray?" the manager wanted to know.

"I, for one. I have gone through many hardships and dangers acting in moving pictures for you, but I draw the line at Florida."

"Why, I think it's perfectly lovely there!" exclaimed Miss Pearl Pennington, a chum of Miss Dixon.

“Do you call alligators lovely?” asked Mr. Pepper Sneed, who was known as “the actor with the grouch.” He was always finding fault. “Lovely alligators!” he sneered. “If you want to go to Florida, and be eaten by an alligator—go. I’ll not!”

Some of the younger members of the company looked rather serious at this. They had not counted on alligators.

“Now look here!” exclaimed Mr. Pertell. “That’s all nonsense. We are going where there are no alligators; but I’ll pay anyone who is injured in the slightest by one of the saurians a thousand dollars!”

“Then I’ll go!” cried Mr. Sneed, who was rather “close,” and fond of money. “But I’m not going to stand a very big bite for that sum!” he stipulated, while the others laughed.

“I’ll grade the payments according to the bites, at the rate of a thousand dollars a big bite,” declared the manager, also laughing.

Page 3

"Now then, you may make your plans accordingly. As I said, we leave by steamer for St. Augustine by way of Jacksonville this day week."

"And will all the scenes be taken in St. Augustine?" asked one of the company.

"No, we shall go into the interior. I expect we may go to a place near Lake Kissimmee, and there—"

"Lake Kissimmee!" exclaimed Alice DeVere, in surprise.

"What about it?" asked Mr. Pertell. "Are you afraid to go there?"

"No, but two girls whom we met on the train going to Deerfield, when we were preparing to make the ice and snow dramas, were going to a place near there. We may meet them."

"That's so!" agreed Ruth.

"I hope you will," went on Mr. Pertell. "Lake Kissimmee, however, is only one of the interior places we shall touch. I will tell you more detailed plans later."

"I—ah—er—presume we shall have a little time to—er—see the sights of St. Augustine; will we not?" asked one of the actors, in affected, drawling tones.

"Oh, yes, plenty of time, Mr. Towne," answered Mr. Pertell. Claude Towne was a new member of the company, rather a "dudish" sort of chap, and not, as yet, very well liked. He dressed in what he considered the "height of fashion."

The week that followed was a busy one for every member of the Comet Film Company. Not that they were required to do much acting in front of the camera; for, after the outdoor scenes in connection with the current play were made, Russ Dalwood, the operator, packed up his belongings ready for the Florida trip.

The others were doing the same thing, and Mr. Pertell was kept busy arranging for transportation, and hotel accommodations, and for the taking care of such films as he would send back from the interior of Florida, since none would be developed there. This work would have to be done, and positives printed for the projecting machines, in New York. This custom was generally followed when the company went out of town.

"Well, are we all here?" asked Mr. Pertell one morning as he reached the steamer, which lay at her dock in New York, ready for the trip to the land of the palms.

"I think so," answered Russ, who had with him a small moving picture camera. He had an idea he might see something that would make a good film.

"No one missing?" went on the manager. "That's good. Oh, by the way, did Mr. Towne arrive? He 'phoned to me that he might be a little late."

"Yes, he's here," answered Russ. "The last I saw of him he was looking in a mirror, arranging his necktie."

"Humph! He's too fond of dress," commented the manager, "but he does well in certain society parts, and that's why I keep him."

The confusion of the passengers and late freight coming aboard gradually grew less. Whistles sounded their bass notes, and gongs clanged.

"All ashore that's goin' ashore!" came the warning cry, and there was a hurried departure of those who had come to see friends or relatives off on the voyage.

Page 4

The moving picture company were gathered together in one place on the deck, and they waved to other members of the company who were not to make the trip, for Mr. Pertell employed a large number of actors, and only a comparatively few of them were going to Florida. The others would continue to work in New York.

The steamer moved slowly away from the dock, in charge of a fussy tug, but presently she began forging ahead under her own steam, moving slowly at first. Soon, however, the vessel was well down the harbor.

Alice and Ruth DeVere, with Russ Dalwood and Paul Ardite, were standing amidships, on the port side, looking down into the water. A little in advance of them stood Mr. Towne and Miss Pennington. The latter had been much in the new actor's company of late.

"They seem quite interested in each other," remarked Russ, in a low tone.

"Yes, they have something in common," added Alice—"a love of good clothes."

"I like nice things myself," put in Ruth, straightening a bow she wore. "You shouldn't say such things, Alice."

"Oh, but you like them in the right way—so do I, for that matter. But I don't go to the extremes they do, and neither do you."

"Hush! They'll hear you," cautioned her sister, for Alice was very impulsive at times.

Indeed the dudish actor and Miss Pennington were glancing rather curiously in the direction of our friends. Then Miss Dixon came along, whispering something that caused the other to laugh.

"Fawncy that now! Only fawncy!" exclaimed Mr. Towne, in his exaggerated English drawl. "That's a good joke—on them!"

"I wonder if they mean us?" spoke Paul. "If I thought so I'd go ask them what the joke was, so we could laugh, too."

"Oh, don't," begged Ruth, who disliked "scenes."

The mirth of Miss Dixon and Miss Pennington seemed to increase rather than diminish, and Mr. Towne was now fairly roaring with merriment. He laughed so hard, in fact, that he coughed, and leaned back against the rail for support.

And then something happened. Just how no one could explain, but Mr. Towne went overboard, his arms and legs wildly waving, and his cane flying far out into the river. He struck the water with a splash, just as one of the deckhands yelled:

“Man overboard!”

CHAPTER II

TO THE RESCUE

“Lower a boat!”

“Throw him a life preserver!”

“Stop the ship!”

Wild and excited were the cries that followed the accident. Russ and Paul were among the first to act, the former getting a life preserver from one of the racks, while Paul caught up one of the round, white life rings and tossed it far out toward a commotion in the water that indicated where Mr. Towne had disappeared. They had to throw the articles toward the stern of the steamer, as she was in motion, and Mr. Towne was soon some distance astern.

Page 5

"Stop the ship!" repeated scores of voices, when the nature of the accident was understood.

Discipline and boat drill were at a high state of perfection aboard the steamer, and soon, with a warning blast of her whistle, the craft trembled under the power of her reversed engines.

"Lower away a boat! Smartly, men!" called one of the officers, as he ran up to the davits whence hung a life-boat.

And while preparations are under way to rescue the unfortunate actor, may I take just a few moments to acquaint my new readers with something of the former books of this series?

The initial volume was entitled "The Moving Picture Girls; Or, First Appearances in Photo Dramas." In that was related how Hosmer DeVere, a talented actor, suddenly lost his voice, through the return of a former throat ailment. He was unable to go in his part in a legitimate drama, and, through the suggestion of Russ Dalwood, who lived in the same apartment house with the DeVeres, in New York, Mr. DeVere took up moving picture acting.

His two daughters, Ruth, aged seventeen, and Alice, aged fifteen, also became engaged in the work, and later they were instrumental in doing Russ Dalwood a great service in connection with a valuable patent he had evolved for a moving picture machine.

The second volume was called "The Moving Picture Girls at Oak Farm; Or, Queer Happenings While Taking Rural Plays." In that book was told how the acquaintance was made of Sandy Apgar, who ran a farm in New Jersey. As Mr. Pertell was looking for some country scenes to use in connection with his moving picture dramas, he took his entire company out to Oak Farm, hiring it from the Apgars.

A curious mystery was solved by the girls, and other members of the company—a mystery that involved the happiness of the old couple who owned Oak Farm, but were on the verge of losing it.

"The Moving Picture Girls Snowbound; Or, The Proof on the Film," was the title of the third book. As its name indicates, the girls and other members of the company were really snowbound. After the summer at Oak Farm, and the fall spent in New York, Mr. Pertell decided to make some dramas in the backwoods of New England, where there was much snow and ice. And for a time there was almost too much snow, for Elk Lodge, where the company of players was housed, was almost buried by a blizzard.

Before going to the backwoods, Mr. DeVere had been much annoyed, and alarmed, by an unjust demand, and how a certain illegal suit against an electric car company was called off, through a discovery made by Ruth and Alice, you may read of in the book.

Russ got “the proof on the film” and when this moving picture was shown privately it caused Dan Merley’s lawyer to say:

“You win! We are beaten!” And Mr. DeVere was at ease after that.

Many beautiful films were made at Elk Lodge, and some wonderful pictures of snow and ice scenes resulted from the trip to the backwoods. Then the company returned to New York, and now we find them *en route* for Florida, when the accident to Mr. Towne occurred.

Page 6

Mr. DeVere and his two daughters lived in the Fenmore Apartment house, in New York City. Across the hall lived Mrs. Sarah Dalwood, and her sons, Russ and Billy, the latter aged about twelve. The Dalwoods and the DeVeres became very friendly, and Russ thought there never was a girl like Ruth. Paul Ardite, the younger leading man of the Comet Film Company, thought the same thing of Alice.

Frank Pertell was the manager and chief owner of the film company. He had a large studio in New York, where all indoor scenes of the plays were enacted, and where the films were made for rental to the various chains of moving picture theaters throughout the country.

He engaged many actors and actresses, but only the principal ones with whom the stories are concerned will be recounted.

Wellington Bunn and Pepper Sneed were the ones who made the most trouble for the manager. Mr. Bunn was an former Shakespearean actor. With his tall hat and frock coat—which costume he was seldom without—Mr. Bunn was a typical tragedian of the old school.

Mr. Sneed was different. He had no particular ambition toward stardom, but he disliked hard work, and he was rather superstitious. Then, too, he was always looking for trouble and often finding it. In short, he was the “grouch” of the company.

Mrs. Margaret Maguire was a motherly member of the troupe. She played “old woman” parts with real feeling, perhaps the more so as her two grandchildren, Tommy and Nellie, were dependent upon her. The youngsters usually went with the company, and were taken on the Florida trip. Occasionally they acted small parts.

Carl Switzer was the German comedian, and was a first-rate actor in his line. His jollity proved an offset to the gloom of Mr. Sneed.

Pop Snooks, the efficient property man, has already been mentioned. His work was easier when the company was on the road, as there the natural scenery was depended on to a great extent.

Pearl Pennington and Laura Dixon were former vaudeville actresses who had gone into the “movies.” Some said it was because they failed to longer draw on the stage. Whether or not this was so, it was certain that the two had very large ideas of their own abilities. They cared little for Ruth and Alice, and the latter had few interests in common with Miss Pennington and Miss Dixon. Paul Ardite has been mentioned. With the exception of Mr. Towne the players had been associated together for some time.

But, just at present Mr. Towne was “disassociated” from the others.

“Oh, can you see him?” cried Ruth, as she clung to Alice. “I—I can’t bear to look!”

“Of course I can see him!” Alice returned. “He’s trying to swim. Oh, he has grabbed the life ring!”

“That will keep him up,” spoke Paul. “Are they lowering the boat?”

“There she goes!” cried Russ. “Ha! I’ve got an idea. I’ll film this, and Mr. Pertell may be able to use it in some drama.”

Page 7

He hurried to where he had set down the small moving picture camera, and while the boat was being lowered by the sailors Russ got views of that.

Then he moved closer to the rail, and took more views as the small craft was sent away under the force of the sturdy arms of the rowers.

"This will be great!" Russ cried.

"Oh, but it seems so cold-blooded!" murmured Ruth. "To take a picture of a drowning man."

"I don't think he is drowning," Paul observed. "He has the ring, and that will keep him up until the boat reaches him. They are almost to him, and he seems able to swim well."

"That's good," declared Alice. She had not turned her head away as had her sister. In fact, in spite of being two years younger than Ruth, Alice often showed more spirit. She was of an impulsive nature, and Mr. DeVere used to say she was very like her dead mother. Ruth was tall and fair, and of a romantic nature. Alice was more practical.

"There! They've got him!" cried Paul, as the boat came up to the actor in the water.

"That's good!" sighed Ruth. "Oh, I was so alarmed. I think I will go below, Alice, when they bring him on deck."

"You don't need to," said her sister. "He's probably all right, except that his fine clothes are spoiled."

"That's so!" chuckled Russ, who was industriously grinding away at the handle of the camera.

CHAPTER III

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.

Page 8

"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.”

Page 9

"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.”

Page 10

"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?"

Page 11

"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.

CHAPTER IV

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.”

Page 12

"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.

Page 13

"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.

Page 14

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!”

CHAPTER V

DISABLED

Panics start so easily, especially at the mere mention of the word “fire,” that it is no wonder there was at once an incipient one aboard the *Tarsus*. But the captain, who was a veteran, acted promptly and efficiently.

Some of the sailors had made a rush for the boats, but the captain, coming down from the bridge on the run, flung himself in front of the excited men. He pushed one or two of them aside so violently that they fell to the deck. Then the commander, in a voice that rang out above the startled calls, cried out:

“Get back, you cowards! If we do take to the boats it will be women and children first! But we’re not going to! Stop that noise!”

Page 15

His hand went, with an unmistakable gesture, to his pocket. Perhaps he was about to draw a weapon, but there was no need.

His ringing words, the lash of “coward,” that cut like a knife, and his bearing, had an immediate effect.

“Stop those shouts of ‘fire!’” he cried, and the excited men and women became quiet.

“Now get back to your places—every one of you!” he ordered the sailors. “You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, to leave your mates to answer the fire call alone,” and he pointed to where a number of hands were about the hatchway, from which smoke was still coming. But the wind was taking it away from the ship now, which was the reason why the vessel had been turned around.

“Get to your quarters!” the captain commanded, and the men slunk away. The danger of a panic was over—at least for the time.

Ruth and Alice stood where they had risen from their steamer chairs, their hands clasped, and Alice had thrust her rosy palm into the broad one of Paul. He held it reassuringly.

“Oh, what shall we do?” murmured Ruth.

“There isn’t another ship in sight,” added Alice, as she looked about the horizon.

“We can call one soon enough,” said Paul. “They’ll start the wireless if they have to.”

Mr. DeVere came hurrying up, his eyes searching about for his daughters. A look of relief came over his face as he saw them.

“You had better go below, and get what things you can save while there is time,” he said, hoarsely. “We may have to take to the boats any minute.”

“Listen, the captain is going to say something,” warned Paul.

Nearly all the passengers were now gathered on deck, as were most of the sailors, but the latter were engaged in fighting the fire through the forward hatchway. Those who were not needed at that particular place were at the other fire stations, in readiness for any emergency.

The *Tarsus* now lay motionless on the ocean, rolling to and fro slowly under the influence of a gentle swell. There was scarcely any wind, and the smoke, which had constantly grown thicker and blacker, even with the efforts made to subdue the flames, arose in a straight pillar of cloud.

"There is no danger!" began the captain, and there were a few murmurs at these rather trite words under the circumstances.

"I mean just what I say!" went on the commander, and there was no mistaking his sincerity. "There is no danger—at present," he continued. "There is a slight fire among the cargo in one of the small forward holds. But it is cut off from the rest of the ship by fire-proof doors, and we are flooding that compartment. The fire will be out shortly, I expect.

"So there is absolutely no need of taking to the boats. Later on, if there should be, I will give you ample warning, and I might add that we carry a sufficient complement of boats and life rafts to accommodate all. And should we take to the boats, the weather is in our favor. So you see you should not worry."

Page 16

"But suppose we have to take to the boats at night?" asked Mr. Sneed, who seemed to have the faculty for hitting on the most unhappy aspect of any situation.

"The fire cannot possibly get beyond control before morning, even if it is not put out," the captain replied. "So there will be no need of boats in the night. Even if there were, we have powerful searchlights, and each boat carries her own storage battery lighting plant. Now, please be reasonable."

His words had a calming effect, and those who had rushed up to take to the boats now began to disperse.

Russ, who had come on deck with Mr. DeVere, was seen talking to Mr. Pertell. As the two advanced toward Ruth and Alice the girls heard Russ saying:

"I'm going to make moving pictures of the fire scenes."

"A good idea!" commented Mr. Pertell. "If the captain will let you."

"I'll ask him."

Captain Falcon, after a moment of consideration, agreed that the young operator might take views showing the fire-fighters at work.

"I wish I had had it going when they made that rush for the boat, though," Russ said.

"I am glad you did not," returned the captain, gravely. "I would not have an audience see what cowards some of my men were to so far forget themselves. That is better forgotten. Doubtless they were mad with fear. But I am glad you did not get that picture."

Russ, however, might be pardoned for still wishing he had it, for he had the true instinct of a moving picture operator—he wanted to get everything possible.

He now set up his camera in different parts of the ship, and made a number of separate views. The black smoke would come out particularly well on the film, he knew.

The men were shown at their various stations, and of those at the hatchway where the smoke came up, several different views were made. Captain Falcon was also shown, directing the fire-fighting.

In order to cut off the draft from the fire the hatchway had been covered with heavy tarpaulins, the hose being put through holes cut in them.

There was some relaxation of the tension following the captain's little speech, but even yet there were serious faces among the passengers, as the volume of smoke seemed

to grow instead of diminish. Captain Falcon, too, was observed to be laboring under a strain.

“I wonder if it is true—as he says—that there is no danger?” observed Alice, as she, Paul and Ruth walked about uneasily, pausing now and then to observe the men at work.

“Oh, I think so,” answered Paul, quickly. “He would have no object in deceiving us, and let matters go so long that it would be necessary to take a risk in getting to the boats. If he did that he might be censured by the owners. I think he really believes there is no danger. And when he thinks otherwise he will give us ample warning.”

“Let us hope so,” murmured Mr. DeVere. “Fire is a terrible element—terrible, and at sea there is nothing more awful! I trust we may be spared from it.”

Page 17

"Let's go see if the wireless is working," suggested Ruth. "It will take our minds off the fire to know that help is being called for—and perhaps on the way."

"Yes, it is working," announced Alice, as they drew near the quarters occupied by the wireless operator and heard the spiteful snapping of the notched wheel of the spark-gap apparatus.

They looked in and saw the operator with the telephone receivers on his ears, while with nervous fingers he pressed the key that made and broke the circuit, thus sending out from the wire aerals between the masts the dots and dashes that, flying through the air, were received on other aerals and translated from meaningless clicks into words fraught with meaning.

"I must get a picture of that, too," observed Russ, as he came up behind Paul, Ruth and Alice. "May I?" he asked of the captain, who, at that moment came to give an order.

"Yes," nodded the commander. And while the vivid blue spark shot from the revolving wheel to the connection, where it was made and interrupted as the operator pressed the key, or allowed it to spring up, Russ made a short film. The young man who was sending a message looked up as he finished and smiled at the group observing him.

"I got that smile, too," Russ informed him.

"Did you get any reply?" asked Captain Falcon, as the operator removed the receivers in order to hear the commander's question.

"The *Bell*, of the Downing Line, is within fifty miles of us," the operator replied. "She can come up when we need her."

"I don't think we shall," the captain said. "But kindly ask her to stand by during the night."

"Then the fire isn't altogether under control?" asked Paul.

"Not as much so as I would like to see it," answered the commander, frankly. "But we are keeping at it."

He wrote out the message he wished sent to the *Bell*, and then the little audience gathered again at the door of the wireless room to watch the operator at work.

Russ made films as long as the daylight lasted, but finally the coming of night forced him to stop, and he put away his camera.

The fighting of the fire still went on, though little of it could be observed now. There were no flames to be seen, but doubtless, down in the hold, where the cargo burned,

there were angry, red tongues of fire. But the compartment was kept closed. It was now nearly full of water, the captain reported, and the fire must soon be extinguished.

“Unless it has crept to another compartment,” ventured Mr. Sneed.

“Hush! Don’t let anyone hear you say such things!” cried Russ, indignantly.

Dinner was not a very cheerful meal, but all managed to eat something. And the night was an uneasy one. What sleep there was came only in catnaps, for there was the constant noise of the pumps, and the running about of the sailors on the decks.

Page 18

The *Tarsus* was still motionless, save only as she rolled with the sea, which was still calm. Captain Falcon found that to proceed would be to drive the smoke aft into the cabins, and he did not want to do this. So he had the main engines shut down.

Through the night the fire was fought, and in the morning it was a gray and haggard captain who faced the anxious group of passengers gathered in the main saloon.

"What is the report?" asked Mr. Pertell.

"Not very encouraging," was the answer. "We are now disabled, and the fire is still burning."

CHAPTER VI

BY WIRELESS

For a moment no one spoke, after the portentous words of Captain Falcon. Men and women looked at each other. The members of the moving picture company glanced from face to face. What would come next?

"Does this mean—does it indicate that we are to take to the boats?" asked Mr. DeVere, solemnly.

"Not necessarily," the captain replied. "I have come to put the matter plainly to you. The fire gained, in the night, and it reached the engine room compartment. We are, therefore, temporarily disabled, and cannot proceed, as we could have done had not this occurred. For we had the first blaze out.

"Now, those who wish will be put into life boats, with such of their belongings as it is practicable to take with them."

"What is the other alternative?" asked Mr. Pertell, as the captain paused, thus indicating that he had another proposition to make.

"The second question is—Will you wait for the *Bell* to come up? She is within about fifty miles of us, I should judge, and can reach us inside of three hours."

"In the meanwhile—the fire may gain?" suggested Mr. Sneed in gloomy tones.

"It may—yes. It probably will, if it reaches the coal bunkers. That is what I am afraid of, and why I speak thus plainly."

"Then I'm going to take to a boat!" exclaimed the "grouch."

“So will I!” put in Mr. Bunn.

“Wait,” advised Mr. Pertell. “If possible I wish to keep all the members of my company together. I have not the fear that some of you have. I trust Captain Falcon.”

“Thank you!” exclaimed the commander, evidently greatly pleased with this mark of confidence. “At the same time I stand ready to lower boats for those who may wish it. The sea is comparatively calm, and you will have to use boats anyhow, if you are taken off by the *Bell*.”

“Must that be done?” asked Alice, in a low voice.

“If we cannot subdue the fire, I am afraid so, Miss DeVere,” answered the captain. “But there is no danger in that. It is often done.”

“Then I say, let’s wait for the other vessel,” decided Mr. DeVere. “There may finally be no necessity for leaving our own ship, I take it?” he asked.

“There may—it’s a chance.”

Page 19

"Then let's take it!" cried Russ. "How will you summon the *Bell*?"

"By wireless. I was only waiting for your decision to write out the message. She has been expecting a call from us, but she has probably drifted farther off than she was last evening. I will summon her."

A little later the wireless began crackling out its call to the unseen *Bell*, and preparations were made to lower away the boats promptly, in case the fire should suddenly gain greater headway. Then there was nothing to do but wait, and fight the flames.

"I insist, though, on being put in a boat!" cried Mr. Sneed. "I want to get off this dangerous ship."

"I do, too!" exclaimed Mr. Bunn.

"I advise you both to stick to this ship," spoke Mr. Pertell, seriously.

"Never!" cried the grouch, and the former Shakespearean actor echoed the word.

"Let them go," decided Captain Falcon, in a low voice to the moving picture manager. "I can send them away in a boat, with some sailors, and tell my men to row slowly, so as not to take them too far away from us. Then, when the *Bell* comes up, they can go aboard her, if our fire is not out by then. Let them go."

"All right," agreed Mr. Pertell, and orders were given to lower a boat. Mr. Bunn and Mr. Sneed got together what belongings they could, and entered it.

"I must get a moving picture of this!" cried Russ.

"Do!" said Mr. Pertell.

"I forbid it!" exclaimed Mr. Sneed. Perhaps he did not want to be shown deserting the ship and the company.

But Russ brought out his camera, and soon the film was moving, as the boat was lowered to the surface of the sea. Then it was soon pulling away from the *Tarsus*, and Russ got those views too.

"Wait! Wait for me!" cried a voice, and up on deck came Mr. Towne. He had a valise in each hand, which probably contained his best suits. "Wait!" he cried. "I want to be saved, too."

"There's no danger; you'll be saved more by staying here than by going with them," said Mr. Pertell. "Besides, you might soil your clothing if you went in the small boat. Another ship is coming for us."



“Oh—er—I certainly would not like to spoil any of my suits—the one I fell overboard in is almost ruined. I—er—I ah—shall stay!” and he went below again.

The wireless was still crackling out its call for aid, and soon an answer was received, saying that the *Bell* was on her way.

“She’s coming!” cried the operator, as he gave the dispatch to the captain. Russ, who had enough of the pictures of Mr. Bunn and Mr. Sneed leaving in the boat, filmed the captain in the act of receiving this message of good cheer. Later it was worked into a stirring drama, called “The Burning Ship.”

With all else that was going on, the work of fighting the blaze in the hold was not for a moment given up. Water and live steam were turned in among the cargo, the pumping apparatus fortunately not having been disabled when the rest of the machinery went out of commission.

Page 20

Russ made more moving pictures, since he now had a good light, and as the fire-fighting was in another part of the ship it made a different series of views.

"Oh, isn't this the most awful thing you ever saw, or heard of?" cried Miss Pennington, coming on deck where Ruth and Alice stood. "Fate seems to be against us at every turn!"

She was very pale, and looked wretched, as did her chum Miss Dixon.

"I guess they didn't take time to make up their complexions," whispered Alice.

"Hush!" cautioned her sister.

"I could cry!" declared Miss Dixon. "I never slept a wink all night." She looked it, too.

"Oh, we'll be all right," said Paul. "The other ship is coming for us, and if necessary we can be transferred to her."

"Will we have to go in one of the small boats, like that?" Miss Pennington wanted to know, as she pointed to the one in which were Mr. Bunn and Mr. Sneed, some distance off, now.

"That's the only kind they have on board," said Mr. DeVere, who had shortly before joined his daughters.

"Oh, I never could go in one of those—never!" the former vaudeville actress cried, tragically.

"Ha! Dose is goot boats! I in der German nify vos," put in Mr. Switzer, "und dey are fery safe."

"Oh, but they look so small, and they hold so little. How can one get enough to eat in them?" asked Miss Dixon, clasping her hands, and looking with her rather effective eyes, first at Mr. Towne, and then at Paul.

"Ha! You dakes along vot you eat!" exclaimed the German. "Pretzels iss fine! Haf one!" and he extended a handful of small ones. Since the company had been snowbound he had always a few in his pocket. He called them his "mascots."

"No, thank you. I never eat them!" declared Miss Dixon, with turned-up nose.

"Let's go see if there is any further report by wireless from the *Bell*," suggested Ruth, who saw kindling wrath in the eyes of her sister. Alice never could get along well with the two actresses, and she was very likely to say something that might lead to a quarrel.

"I'll come along," said Paul.

"So will I," echoed Mr. Towne. In spite of his affected mannerisms, he could be "nice," at times. It was Ruth who had said this, but then Ruth had such a kind heart that she generally found a good quality in nearly everyone, whatever their failings.

"Yes, she's coming on at full speed," reported the wireless operator. "She'll be with us in about an hour, now. And I guess it's time, too," he added in a low voice.

"Why?" asked Russ, when the girls had passed on.

"Because I believe the fire is gaining. I think it's in one of the coal bunkers now, and that means it will burn steadily, and may eat through the side of the ship."

The operator turned to his apparatus, for he had been told to keep in constant communication with the oncoming rescue ship.

Page 21

As Paul rejoined the girls, there sounded through the *Tarsus* a dull explosion, that made the ship tremble.

The commander was hurrying along the deck. Many of the passengers, who had gone below to pack their belongings in anticipation of being transferred, now came rushing out of their staterooms.

"What was it?"

"Are we going to blow up?"

"Is the ship sinking?"

"Don't be alarmed!" Captain Falcon exhorted them, but, even as he spoke, there came a second dull rumbling, a trembling of the vessel, and another explosion, louder than the first. There were screams from frightened women and children, and a number of men passengers made a rush for the boats, as the sailors had done before.

CHAPTER VII

IN PORT

"Stand back!" cried Captain Falcon, and again his hand went to his pocket as though to draw a weapon. "Stand back! The same rule applies to you men passengers as to the sailors. Women and children first! Do you hear? Stand back!"

The rush was halted almost before it started. Then Mr. Switzer, who had taken no part in it, said slowly:

"Dot is right. Gentlemen, we are forgetting ourselves!"

"And it took him—above everyone else—to remind them of it," said Mr. DeVere in a low voice. He had remained by the side of his daughters.

"Mr. Switzer is a bigger man than any of us thought," murmured Ruth. "Oh, Daddy, is the boat going to sink?"

"We are going to be blown up!" exclaimed a big man, who, with others, had made a half start for the boat, and then had hung back shamefacedly.

"If you say that again!" cried Paul, in a fierce whisper, "I'll throw you overboard! This is no time to start a panic!"

The man slunk away. There came another explosion, not so loud as the first, but enough to cause the men to start involuntarily, and to bring frantic screams from the women passengers.

"What is that, Captain?" asked Mr. Pertell.

"Nothing to be alarmed about," was the calm answer.

"They sound alarming enough," declared a woman.

"But they are not," the commander insisted. "They are only slight explosions of coal gas in some of the bunkers. The fire is slowly eating into them but the explosions are not heavy enough to cause any serious damage to the ship.

"The *Bell* will soon be up to us. In fact, we could see her now, were it not for the slight haze. And, as it is evident that you will have to be taken off in her, I am going to lower the boats, and let you row away from this ship.

"You will be picked up by the *Bell* as soon as she gets here, and, in any event, you would have to take to the small boats. So you might as well start. I will have all your baggage brought on deck ready for transfer," he added to the moving picture manager.

Page 22

"Very good," assented Mr. Pertell. "I am sorry this has occurred, but perhaps it is best that we leave the ship."

"It will be better for your peace of mind, though really I think we can conquer the fire," the captain went on. "But we are disabled, and may not be able to proceed for some time."

"What are you going to do when we are gone?" asked Alice, who, with Ruth, had recovered some of her equanimity by this time. "Are you coming with us, Captain Falcon—you and your sailors?"

"I am going to stick by the ship!" he answered, and there was a proud ring in his voice. "I believe I can save her, and then we'll make repairs, and get to port under our own steam. I want to save the owners salvage, if I can."

"There speaks a brave man," murmured Mr. DeVere. "And there are many such unknown, who are going down the sea in ships every day. A brave man!"

"Man the falls!" ordered Captain Falcon to those sailors who were not engaged in fighting the fire. "Man the falls, and stand by to lower the boats!"

"Oh, must we really go in those little things?" cried Miss Pennington, as she heard this.

"Certainly," answered Russ, who was near her. "You wouldn't expect to swim; would you?"

"Horrid thing!" snapped the actress. "Come, Laura. Don't leave me. I'm so frightened!"

"So am I," declared her companion. "It's awful!"

"Their fright hasn't made them pale, at any rate," whispered Alice. "They've taken on color, lately."

"Oh, my dear, you mustn't say such things," chided Ruth.

The work of getting the passengers and their baggage into the boats was soon under way. There was some confusion, not a little evidence of fright on the part of many, and some tears. But among the bravest were little Tommie and Nellie. They thought it all a lark, and probably, in their case, it was the bliss of ignorance.

Russ, who had been standing near Ruth and Alice, suddenly started for his stateroom.

"Where are you going?" asked Ruth, as the call came for them to take their places in a boat.

“For my moving picture camera! I’m going to get views of this. It’s too good to miss!”

“It seems so—so—” began Ruth, but Alice interrupted with:

“Why shouldn’t he get the film? There is really no danger of death, and it is a chance that he may never have again. A film like this could be worked into a great play!”

“Spoken like a real artist of the movies!” cried Mr. Pertell. “Go ahead, Russ. Get all you can; but don’t take any chances.”

Then the young operator busied himself with making a film that was afterward said to be one of the best in the world showing a rescue from a burning ship. And the beauty of it was that it was real. There was no posing, and the ship was not an old hulk chartered for the occasion, and set fire to, as has been done more than once.

Page 23

As the women and children were first helped to the boats, and the craft then carefully lowered to the sea, Russ took picture after picture. Fortunately the sea and weather were both calm, and, after the first little fright, no one made any disturbance.

The boat containing Mr. Bunn and Mr. Sneed had returned part way to the ship, the sailors having heard the explosions, and desiring to aid in the work of saving the passengers if there was any need, for their craft could hold many more.

But there was no need. There was ample room in the other boats, and, as Captain Falcon had said, the explosions were really of little moment—at least, for the present.

Boat after boat was loaded and lowered away, and not an accident marred the work. True, Mrs. Maguire, in her anxiety to see that Nellie and Tommy were safe, nearly fell overboard, but a burly sailor caught her just in time.

“How are you coming on, Russ?” asked Mr. Pertell who, with Pop Snooks, was seeing to the bringing up of the baggage, and the other property of the moving picture company.

“Fine,” answered the young operator. “This will be a great film!”

“Glad to hear it! It will be our turn soon.”

“I’m going to stick till the last boat. I want to get all the views I can.”

Russ spoke simply, but he well knew the danger he ran in remaining until the last boat was sent away. The ship might be in no real danger; even as Captain Falcon had said; but, on the other hand, the fire might have spread more than the commander realized. But Russ, like many another picture operator, was not afraid to do his duty as he saw it, even in the face of danger.

Suddenly a great shout arose.

“Wonder what’s happened now?” remarked Mr. Pertell. He knew a moment later, for the shout took to itself words:

“The ship!”

“The rescue ship!”

“There comes the *Bell!*”

Sweeping up through the mist came the ship that had responded to the wireless calls for aid. On she came at full speed, and when she caught sight of the *Tarsus* she sent out a reassuring blast from her great whistle. It was answered in kind.

"Now you're all right!" cried Captain Falcon over the side, to those in the small boats. "Row the passengers over to her," he ordered the sailors, "and then come back to your ship!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" was the answer. And be it said to the credit of those sailors that not one of them shirked, or tried to desert, which might have been easily forgiven in the face of the danger.

"I've got to get a picture of her!" cried Russ, as he focused the camera on the oncoming ship. And a fine picture he obtained.

"Oh, now we're all right, Daddy!" cried Ruth, as she nestled close to her father. Mr. DeVere had been allowed to go in the boat with his daughters, as there was plenty of room, and all the other women had been provided for.

Page 24

"I wasn't worrying," declared Alice.

"Oh yes, it's easy to say that now," sighed Ruth. "But I'm sorry for poor Captain Falcon."

"He is a brave man," said Mr. DeVere, again.

The *Bell* came as close as was safe, and a little later the small boats rowed to her accommodation ladder, which had been lowered. Then began the risky work of getting from the small boats to this ladder, and so aboard the *Bell*. For there was now a little sea on, and the boats rose and fell to a considerable degree.

But the sailors were skillful, and soon all the passengers and baggage were transferred. Russ was the last to leave the *Tarsus*, and the last to go aboard the *Bell*, for he wanted every view he could get.

He was received with a cheer, given not only by his friends, but by the passengers and crew of the *Bell*.

For Mr. Pertell had told of the devotion to duty of the young operator, and his act was duly appreciated.

Back to the burning vessel—perhaps, for all they knew, back to their doom—rowed the sailors of the *Tarsus*. The chief mate of the *Bell*, at the request of his commander, went to consult with Captain Falcon. On returning, the mate reported that Captain Falcon felt he could get the fire under control, and also make repairs to enable him to get his ship to port.

"Then we will proceed," said Captain Blackstone, of the *Bell*. He gave the signal to go ahead, and soon the ill-fated *Tarsus*, with the smoke pall hanging about her, was left behind.

But it is a pleasure to record that, after a hard fight, Captain Falcon and his men did subdue the flames, and, after harder work, temporary repairs enabled them to limp into port. Thus the commander saved his ship, and also avoided the payment, on the part of the owners, of heavy salvage. Later he was suitably rewarded by his superiors.

"Oh, but what an experience!" lamented Miss Pennington, as she sank into a steamer chair after the rescue. "I wonder what sort of a stateroom we'll have here, Laura?"

"They'll be lucky if they get even a berth," grumbled Paul. For the *Bell* carried a number of passengers, and the addition of those from the *Tarsus* rather crowded her.

But accommodations were found for all, though the quarters were rather cramped. The *Bell* was bound direct for St. Augustine, and in due season, and without further mishap, the moving picture company reached that oldest city in the United States.

CHAPTER VIII

ST. AUGUSTINE

“Oh, isn’t it beautiful!”

“The most gorgeous place I ever saw!”

Alice and Ruth were standing in the doorway of the hotel to which the moving picture company had been taken. They were looking out into the ladies’ court—into a sun-lit and palm-girded garden, wherein a fountain played, the water falling with a musical tinkling.

Page 25

Birds flitted here and there amid the bright flowers, but to the moving picture girls the palms seemed the most wonderful of all. Such palms!

"I never realized that the great Creator could make anything so beautiful," murmured Ruth, reverently. "And, Oh! Alice; to think that we can enjoy it!"

"Yes, isn't it wonderful, after all the storm and stress of the fire, to be in this lovely, calm place?"

"And the best part of it is that we're getting *paid* for it!" observed a voice behind the two girls. They turned, with a start, for they had lost themselves in a dreaming reverie, to find Russ and Paul smiling at them. It was Paul who spoke.

"It does seem a shame to take the money under these circumstances," added Russ, with a laugh.

"It's like a vacation," agreed Alice. "Oh, but isn't it just—just too—"

She was evidently searching for a fitting simile.

"Alice," warned Ruth, gently. She was endeavoring to wean her sister from the habit of using slang expressions; but Alice always boasted that she liked to take "short cuts," and that slang—that is, her refined variety—offered the best method of accomplishing this very desirable object.

"Oh, I was only just going to say—scrumptious!" laughed the younger girl. "You don't mind that; do you, sister mine? This is really the most scrumptiously scrumptious place I've ever seen!"

"I'm afraid you're hopeless," was the smiling retort.

"Well, it's certainly swell—that's my word for it," answered Russ, with a frank laugh.

Indeed, Mr. Pertell had not spared expense in taking out his moving picture company. And he had a method in going to one of the largest and finest hotels in St. Augustine. He intended to stage some scenes of one of the Southern plays there, and having his actors and actresses right in the hotel made it much more practical.

"Let's take a walk," proposed Russ. "There's nothing to do to-day."

It was the morning after their arrival and Mr. Pertell was not quite ready to proceed with making films. The fire aboard the *Tarsus*, and the necessity of taking another vessel, had rather upset everyone, so a day or so of rest had been decided upon.

“Where shall we go?” asked Alice, readily falling in with the proposal. “You’ll come, won’t you, Ruth?”

“I think so—yes.”

“There are lots of places to see,” suggested Paul. “This is the oldest city in the United States. I’ve got some guide books up in my room, and a lot of views. We’ll pick out some points of interest and visit them.”

“We’ll have plenty of chance to see the sights,” remarked Russ. “I understand there are to be a number of films made in the city and vicinity, so you’ll probably have to act out around Fort Marion and at Fort Mantanzas, as well as in the slave market. I’ll be with you in a minute. I just want to get my little hand camera, to make a few snap-shots.”

Page 26

While waiting for him and Paul to return, the girls slipped up to their room a minute.

“Just to freshen up,” as Alice put it, though really there was no need in her case, nor on the part of Ruth, either. The day was perfect—like summer—and the girls, knowing they were coming to the land of the palm and orange blossom, had brought suitable dresses.

Ruth wore white, with a mere suggestion of trimming in blue, and with her fair hair and blue eyes she was a picture that made more than one man—elderly as well as young—turn for a second look.

The darker beauty of Alice was well set off by her dress of light tan pongee with maroon trimming, and her sparkling brown eyes were dancing with life, and the love of life, as she came out to join her sister and the young men.

“Primping, as usual,” mocked Russ, but with a laugh that took the sting out of his words.

“Naturally,” agreed Alice, determined not to let him “fuss” her.

They strolled out under the beautiful loggia, through an avenue of palms and many tropical plants, and breathed deeply of the perfumed air.

“Oh, it is perfect—just perfect!” sighed Ruth. “I think the Garden of Paradise must have been in Florida.”

“There you go!” cried Alice. “First you know you’ll want to go off and live the simple life under a palm tree, with bananas for lunch and oranges for dinner. And when your—er—your hero—we’ll say, comes riding on that milk-white steed I so despise, you’ll be so thin that he won’t know you.”

“Thank you!” returned her sister. “But a *svelte* figure is much to be desired these days.”

“Not that you’re getting stout!” declared Alice. “Really it is I who ought to diet on bananas and—”

“Orange blossoms,” finished Paul.

“Thanks,” and she bowed gracefully to him.

“Well, Paul, where is it to be—you’re the guide?” asked Russ, as they emerged on King street. “Where’s your map?”

“I have it. What do you say we go out to the old city gates, and then to Fort Marion?”

“Wherever you say,” agreed Alice. “It is all new to us.”

They soon reached the north bend of St. George street and stood before the old city gates. These once formed part of the northerly line of defence of the ancient city.

“Built in 1743,” declaimed Alice, as she read from the bronze tablet set in the masonry by the D.A.R. “My, how long ago that seems; doesn’t it?”

“A mere trifle!” replied Russ, airily. “Get together there, and I’ll snap you,” he invited. “If you think that’s old we’ll go to the Fountain of Youth a little later, and renew our youngness.”

“Oh, is that really here?” cried Ruth, with such sudden interest that they all laughed.

“Yes, my ancient sister, it is,” said Alice. “Dost wish to quaff a cup?”

“Merely for the novelty of it—yes,” answered Ruth, and she too, laughed. Her cheeks were the color of bridesmaid roses, and Russ, as he looked at her, wished—

Page 27

But there—What's the use of being mean and telling on a good chap?

The pictures taken, they strolled on. At Fort Marion, on the banks of the Mantanzas River, they found much of interest; but agreed to explore it more in detail at another time.

"You'll have to be filmed here, anyhow," Russ told the girls. "There's an important drama, with several scenes, laid here."

"Are we in it?" asked Ruth.

"Yes, the whole company; and Mr. Pertell said he'd have to hire some supers, too."

By this Russ meant that the manager would have to engage extra persons to impersonate the unimportant characters in the play, as is often done in "mob" scenes in the theaters.

"Now for the orange grove, and then—the Fountain of Youth!" cried Paul, as they came out of the old fort.

"What a delightful combination!" exclaimed Alice.

"Youth—and—orange blossoms!" and she clapped her hands, her eyes shining.

"Be careful," warned Ruth in a low voice, as the young men went on ahead.

"Why, sister of mine?"

"Don't talk so much of orange blossoms."

"Pooh! I'm not thinking of getting married!"

"Oh, Alice!"

"Well, wasn't that what you meant?"

"Not at all, I only meant—"

"I don't believe you knew what you did mean. Come on, we'll be lost!" and she caught Ruth by the arm and hurried on after Russ and Paul.

CHAPTER IX

IN THE DUNGEON

“Oh, if we could only stay here forever!”

“It would be Paradise!”

Thus Ruth and Alice exclaimed as they entered the orange grove, a short distance from the city gates. And indeed the scene that greeted them, and the sweet odors, might well call for this praise and desire from even the most *blase* tourist.

Even Russ, grown accustomed by his calling to odd scenes, was impressed by the wonderful sight, and as for Paul, who had something of the romantic nature of Ruth, it was a pure delight to him.

“I wonder if they will take any pictures here?” said Ruth, softly—at first it seemed as if one must talk in whispers so as not to disturb the beauty of the place.

“Oh, I’m going to film you here,” announced Russ. “Stand still a moment and I’ll snap you now. There’s a pretty place.”

Ruth and Alice assumed graceful poses, and soon their likenesses were registered on the film. Russ never tired of taking pictures, and when he was not making moving ones he was using his small hand camera. How many times he had taken the likeness of Ruth it would be hard to estimate.

They wandered about the orange grove, and the young men bought some of the delicious fruit, right from the trees, and fully ripe. It had a flavor all its own.

“Let me show you how to eat an orange,” suggested one of the men of the grove, as he saw the young people going about, “in the way it is usually done when no orange spoons are to be had.”

Page 28

"Somebody has said," went on the man, "that you need to lean over a bathtub to eat an orange this way, but it's worth while. You get a little smeared up doing it; but you can wash in the spring over there," and he pointed to one amid a pile of stones.

Then with his keen knife he cut the orange in a peculiar spiral manner, with the skin left on so that eventually he had a long yellow strip, with the sections of orange clinging to the yellow rind.

"Now, all you've got to do is to run your mouth along that strip," he directed, "and you get all the juice—that is, all you don't miss. It takes a little practice; but I've got some black boys that can get every drop. Watch!"

Rapidly he ate along the extended strip of skin, to which clung the cut sections of orange. In a moment it was clean.

"It's an awfully crude way of doing it—but, as long as we're in an orange grove, let's do as the orange 'grovers' do," laughed Alice.

"I'm game!" cried Paul.

"Same here!" put in Russ, and they cut their oranges as the man had done. The latter then prepared one each for Ruth and Alice, and amid much laughter—the girls and the young men leaning far over so as not to drip the juice on their clothes—they finished the delicious fruit.

"Now bring on your bathtub!" cried Russ.

"There's the spring," the man said. "There's a basin near it, and it's clean."

Laughing over the new way of eating oranges, but voting that it was worth while, even if it was a bit "smeary," the young folks washed their hands and faces, and kept on through the grove, growing more and more glad at every step that they had come to Florida.

"And now for the Fountain of Youth!" cried Paul.

"I don't feel that I need it, after that delicious orange," laughed Ruth.

"Indeed, if you get any younger, you'll go back to kindergarten days," remarked Paul.

"Thank you. I don't want to be quite as young as that."

The Fountain of Youth, one of the curiosities of St. Augustine, is on Myrtle avenue, two blocks north of the orange grove, and the four laughing young people were soon there.

"Is this really the fountain Ponce de Leon thought would give eternal youth?" asked Ruth, half-seriously, as they stood near the little roofed-over spring.

"That is the legend," declared Paul. "Of course that's not saying it's so. But the spring has one peculiar quality."

"What's that?" asked Russ.

"The waters rise and fall without any particular cause. Sometimes they are higher than at others, and none of the other wells, or springs, in this vicinity do that. So you see it may be miraculous after all."

"Let's try it," suggested Alice, who was always ready for anything new.

"Oh, but perhaps it isn't good water," objected Ruth, more cautious. "We may get typhoid, or something like that."

Page 29

"Nonsense!" laughed Alice, but she looked questioningly at Paul.

"Lots of people drink the water," he said. "Allow me," and he lowered a small bucket attached to a rope made fast to the roof of the well.

He drew it up, brimming over, and with a low bow handed some of the water to Alice, pouring it into a small collapsible cup he happened to have with him.

"Drink! And may you never grow old!" he said, and there was more of meaning in his eyes than in his words.

"We'll all sample it!" cried Russ, and as Ruth was induced, just for the fun of the thing, to try some, they heard the murmur of voices behind them.

"Save some for us!" was the call, and Miss Pennington and Miss Dixon came up.

"We'll all be young together," said Alice. Though she and her sister were not very chummy with the two former vaudeville actresses, they were not exactly unfriendly. And who could be unfriendly in that beautiful spot, and on the reputed site of the Fountain of Youth?

"The more you drink the younger you get!" bantered Paul, as Miss Dixon asked him for a second cup.

"Gracious, then I'll turn into a baby," exclaimed Miss Pennington. "I've been here once before this morning, and I took several glasses."

"Back to juvenile roles for yours!" cried Russ. "Mr. Pertell will have to look for another leading lady."

"I haven't noticed any effect yet," she said, as she took out a vanity box, and surreptitiously used her chamois, leaving a more brilliant tint on her face.

"It takes time," went on Russ, half-seriously. "You will awaken in the morning, crying for a rattle."

Thus they made merry near the well, with its queer square stones built into pillars to hold up the roof.

"Poor Ponce de Leon," sighed Ruth. "How disappointed he must have been when he found out that his life was slipping away in spite of the Fountain of Youth. I wonder if he really believed he had found it?"

"He couldn't have—when he came to die," remarked Russ, practically.

"But it is a pretty story," Ruth said, softly. "Poor Ponce de Leon!"

"The Indians told him this was the fountain," said Paul, who had been reading history. "Near this fountain was found a large coquina cross. The cross was located by the discovery of a silver casque, which contained documents telling of the matter, and one seems to fix the date of the first visit of Ponce de Leon to Florida. That was in 1513, according to the documents found in the casque.

"Am I boring you?" he asked quickly, for he thought the two former vaudeville actresses looked as though they wanted to talk of something else besides dry historical facts.

"No, indeed!" cried Alice. "I just love to hear about this."

"Do go on," urged Ruth, and even Miss Pennington condescended to say:

"It sounds interesting."

Page 30

"I'll read you what one of the old documents said," went on Paul. "As we bore down upon him we found him to be an Indian, in a skin boat with a skin sail, running to a point twenty feet in the air, with a bow at the top. In the boat, which I describe in my descriptive image, I went ashore with the Indian. We landed near a spring that they call the Fountain of Youth; there they had a temple built where they worshipped the sun, and there I built a cross out of coquina, which is a natural formation of the sea, and I laid it with the rising and setting sun. In the heart of the cross I placed a descriptive image of myself, and took possession in the name of our beloved Catholic King.'

"That's in the document," went on Paul, "and the paper was given to the United States, through courtesy of the Governor of Sevilla, in 1908."

"How interesting," murmured Alice. "And to think that we are standing on such historic ground! Think of the ancient Indians worshipping the sun here," and she looked up at the flaming orb.

"The sun is paying altogether too much attention to me!" complained Miss Pennington, with a laugh. "It will spoil my complexion, in spite of the Fountain of Youth. I must be going."

"Oh, by the way, Russ," she called back over her shoulder, "Mr. Pertell was looking for you."

"Was he?" asked the young operator. "Then I'd better be getting back."

"I fancy we all had," spoke Ruth. "It must be near lunch time. Come along, Alice."

Russ, back at the hotel, found that the manager had decided to make as the first film one showing some of his players at Fort Marion, and he wanted Russ to go out there with him and plan the scenario, which would be undertaken in a day or two.

The time quickly passed, for it was so lovely in St. Augustine, and there were so many things to see, that night seemed to follow quickly on the heels of morning.

Arrangements having been made, the company one morning went to the old fort and there Russ filmed many scenes. The play was to be called "The Spanish Prisoner," the background of the old fort being most effective.

The players were filmed, going through their various parts on what was once the drawbridge in front of the portcullis, near the old watchtower on the stairway that was originally an inclined way, by which artillery was hauled up to the *terre plein*.

Ruth and Alice were in many of the scenes, but there came a rest for Alice who, always interested in matters of antiquity, wandered about the old fort by herself, Ruth and Mr. DeVere being engaged.

The girl finally made her way to what had been the old guard room and dungeon. In the guard room was a table and some chairs, for the fort is in charge of a detachment from the United States Army, and accommodations are provided for visitors.

Alice sat down in one of the chairs, and looked at the big open fire-place at one end of the guard rooms. She recalled some of its history that Paul had read to her that morning.

Page 31

The dungeon was accidentally discovered in 1835 and two iron cages, containing the skeletons of a man and woman, were found fastened to the wall.

"Poor creatures! What a horror it must have been!" thought Alice, as she looked toward the narrow opening to the black dungeon.

"Ugh! It's getting on my nerves, staying here!" she exclaimed, for she was all alone. "I'm going!"

As she rose she heard a noise near the doorway by which she had entered. Turning quickly, expecting to see one of the company, she was horrified to see by the light which entered through a barred window, an aged colored man facing her. He did not approach, but bowing before her exclaimed in quavering tones:

"Den I find yo', my Missie! Old Jake look eberywhere fo' you,' but he find yo'! I knowed I'd find yo' some day, an' now I has, but it's been a pow'ful long time, honey! A long time!" and with outstretched hands, as he took a battered hat from his head, he approached her. Alice screamed and got behind the table.

CHAPTER X

THE MOTOR RACES

With wildly beating heart, Alice watched the approach of the colored man, and then, somehow or other, it came to her in a flash that she need not fear him.

His bearing was most deferential, as of some old slave toward a cherished mistress. His manner was gentle and, after advancing a short distance toward her, he stopped, bowed again, placed his battered hat over his heart, and said:

"I knowed I'd find yo' some day, Missie, an' now I has. Yo' ain't gwine t' send po' ole Jake away; is yo', Missie?"

Alice, having repressed the desire to scream, was now more calm and, as quietly as she could she said:

"You must go out of here, Jake. Go out, and I will come out, too."

"Yes'm, Missie, dat's what I'll do," he said. "Ole Jake'll do jest as his missis says. Oh, but it' pow'ful good t' see you' once mo', Missie!"

"You must go now," repeated Alice, firmly.

And, without another word, he turned and shuffled out. But he had no sooner reached the entrance to the dungeon than Alice, who had remained behind the table, not knowing whether to go out or not, saw the old colored man seized by a soldier—one of those detailed at the fort.

“Here now, Jake!” the soldier exclaimed, “haven’t I told you time and again to keep away from here? You know you haven’t any right to come in this part of the fort!”

“Yais, sah, Cunnel, I knows it, sah,” replied the aged negro, with a low bow. “But yo’ see, I done found mah li’l Missie what I’s been lookin’ fo’ so long! Dat’s why I come heah!”

“Great Scott! Have you been bothering some of the women visitors?” cried the soldier and, wheeling about on his heel, he hurried into the dungeon, which Alice had just decided to leave. He met her coming out, and by her agitated manner must have guessed that something had happened.

Page 32

"I beg your pardon, Miss," began the soldier, with a salute, "but has old Jake annoyed you?"

"Oh, not at all," she answered, as calmly as she could. "He only startled me for a moment; that is all. I was here alone, foolishly, perhaps—"

"Oh, no, that's all right," interrupted the soldier. "We want the visitors to go about as they please, alone or in company. Old Jake's as harmless as a kitten. He isn't just right up here," he said, touching his head, and speaking in low tones.

"I thought as much," responded Alice, with a smile.

"He's perfectly harmless," went on the soldier, looking out to see the aged negro shuffling off. "You see, he used to be a slave in some Southern family," the army man explained. "He was given his freedom, but never took it, and they say he went insane when his mistress died. He had taken care of her since she was a baby, and he took it very much to heart."

"Poor old man," murmured Alice.

"Yes, we all like him around here," the soldier continued. "He has a notion now that his 'little mistress,' as he calls her, is only lost, and he keeps searching for her. Sometimes he scares the lady visitors, so we try to keep him out of the lonely parts of the fort. But he must have slipped in here when no one was watching. I'll give him a good lecture."

"Oh, please don't be harsh to him!" pleaded Alice. "Really he did nothing!"

"But he scared you, Miss."

"Oh, not much. Only for a second. Then I guessed what his trouble was. Please say you won't scold him!" she pleaded.

"Well, I guess I'll have to, if you ask me that way, Miss," said the soldier with the air and manner of a Southern colonel. "We can't refuse the ladies anything, you know," and he bowed and smiled in a frank manner that pleased Alice.

"Then you won't punish him?" she asked.

"Punish him? Oh, no, Miss. Old Jake is just like a child. He sort of lives in the fort. No, I won't do any more than tell him to keep away from here, for them's the captain's orders, Miss."

"All right," she answered. "And now I think I had better join my friends. What a horrible place this is!" she added, with a backward look at the dungeon.

“You may well say that, Miss. But it isn’t so bad now as it must have been in the old days. It’s a queer world, that men would make such a place to put a fellow creature in,” and with this somewhat philosophical remark the soldier saluted again, as Alice bade him good-bye.

“Why, where have you been?” Ruth asked, as sister appeared. “We have been looking all over for you. Where were you?”

“In jail!”

“Jail! Alice, don’t joke about such things.”

“No, sister mine, I was only in a deep, dark dismal dungeon, and I had such a romantic adventure.”

“Oh, do tell us about it!” begged Miss Pennington.

“Did you meet a handsome prisoner?” asked Miss Dixon.

Page 33

"Yes, a regular Othello."

"Othello? Who speaks of Othello?" interrupted Mr. Bunn. "I have played him many times!" and he threw back his shoulders, and tried to give himself the airs he was wont to assume in the theater.

Alice told her story, minimizing her fright as much as possible.

"It was romantic," said Ruth, softly, as her sister concluded. "Only, dear, you musn't go off in any more strange dungeons alone."

"I won't," was the promise, given readily enough.

The making of moving pictures was soon over for the day, and the company returned to the hotel. Some of the members went to their rooms, while the others sat about in the beautiful tropical garden, listening to the mingled music of the band and the fountain.

"Good stunt on for to-morrow," said Russ, coming up behind Ruth, and taking a chair near her.

"What is it?" asked Paul, who was with Alice. "Any more fort stuff?"

"No, but it's out near the fort. Mr. Pertell is arranging for a motor boat race, with you girls in rival boats. You know there is a speed course on Mantanzas Bay, and he's hired two of the fast boats. It's going to be a regular race, for the two fellows who run the boats are real water rivals.

"Mr. Pertell has induced them to act the parts for him, and there'll be some fun. Part of our company is to be in one boat, and part in the other, and some will be on the fort wall, outside the old moat, watching the boats come up. It ought to make a dandy picture."

"I'm sure it will," declared Ruth, who was always interested in the mechanical end, as well as in the artistic side. Russ had taught her considerable about the technical part of the business of making moving pictures.

"A motor boat race will be simply fine!" Alice exclaimed. "I hope the boat I am in wins."

"There's no telling," Russ went on. "As I said, the men who own the boats are real rivals, so each will do his best to come out ahead. There'll be no fake about this—if you'll excuse the use of slang," he added.

That evening, seated in the palm garden, Mr. Pertell explained to his company something of the plans for the next day, telling of the plot of the play in which the motor boat race was to figure.

“That sounds interesting,” commented Mr. DeVere.

“Do those boats go very fast?” inquired Mr. Sneed.

“Rather—they are two of the fastest boats in the world,” answered the manager.

“Then there’s sure to be an accident,” predicted the grouchy actor. “I think you may count me out of this play, Mr. Pertell. I have had enough of water stuff.”

“Well, you’re due to have a bit more,” observed Mr. Pertell, drily. “For you fall overboard from one of the boats, at the conclusion of the race.”

“I fall overboard!” was the startled exclamation.

“Yes, and Mr. Bunn dives in after you. You are both good swimmers—you remember you told me so.”

Page 34

The use of the dock of the St. Augustine Power Boat Club had been loaned for the making of the moving picture, and next day, with such of his company as were to go in the boats, Mr. Pertell went to the float. Others of the players took their places on the wall of the fort.

Two cameras were to be used, Russ working one to show the start and finish of the race, and Pop Snooks the other, to depict the action of the players not in the boats.

The motor boats were powerful and handsome craft. The skippers of each were at the wheel as the players took their places, and each boat carried a blackened and greasy mechanician, as looking after high-powered motors was no simple matter.

"Well, are we all ready?" asked the manager, as he assigned the players to their places.

"All ready, sir," answered Mr. DeVere.

Alice was in one boat, well up in front beside the captain-owner, while Ruth occupied a similar position in the other craft.

"You may start, if you please," said the manager, with a nod at Russ and another at the skippers.

A moment later the air was filled with the thundering, rattling exhaust of the motors as the boats swept away from the float.

The motor race was on.

CHAPTER XI

TO LAKE KISSIMMEE

The staccato explosions of the motor boats, the cheers of the spectators, of whom there were many; the clicking of the camera operated by Russ, and the shouts of the picture-players themselves as they went through the "business" prescribed for this act of the play, made the scene a gay one.

"This will make a fine film," declared Mr. Pertell, who was in the boat with Alice, Mr. Bunn, Mr. Sneed and Mr. DeVere.

"I think so," agreed the latter. "I am glad we came to Florida."

"Is your throat better?" the manager asked.

“Indeed yes—much better. That is, it does not pain me, but I still retain my hoarseness, as you notice.”

“Yes, and I am selfish enough to wish that it will stay with you a little longer,” the manager said. “That is, only so that you will not leave me and go back to the legitimate,” he added, quickly. “For I want you in moving pictures. I have some other plans when we finish work here, and you and your daughters will be much needed.”

“I am glad you have such a good opinion of us,” murmured the veteran actor.

“Where are we going from here?” asked Alice.

“That’s a secret,” laughed the manager. “I haven’t it all worked out myself, as yet.”

The boats sped on, the rival skippers striving to gain the lead. The men in charge of the motors, too, did everything in their power, in the way of changing the gasoline mixture, or by means of copious oiling, to get one more revolution out of their engines. But the boats seemed very evenly matched. A big wave was thrown up on either bow of each boat.

Page 35

Russ, after getting pictures of the start, had gone with his camera, by a short cut, to a little promontory on shore, where he got other views of the boats racing through the water. Then he went farther on and, getting into another motor boat, took his place near the finish line, to film the end of the race.

"Oh, I do hope we win!" exclaimed Alice, to her captain.

"I'm going to do my best," he answered, grimly, as he glanced across to where the other boat was forging through the water.

And in her boat Ruth was saying the same thing.

Each skipper had been holding something in reserve in the way of power, and now the mechanics were signalled to use this.

The boats were nearing the finish line now, for the race, for the purpose of the moving pictures, was only a short one.

But, as it happened, the captain of the boat Alice was in, got his signal a little ahead of his rival, so that he shot forward, and thus gained an advantage the other motor boat could not cut down.

"Oh, we're going to win!" cried Alice in delight, clapping her hands as she saw Russ, in his boat at the finish line, operating his camera. "We're going to win!"

Miss Pennington and Miss Dixon, who, with Ruth, were in the other boat, looked glum. As for Ruth she was of that gentle nature which is willing to lose, that others may enjoy even a brief pleasure, and she rejoiced in the delight of her sister.

"Well, I guess he's got me!" regretfully admitted the captain of the losing boat. "He was a little too quick for me."

And so it proved, for the boat containing Alice shot across the line a winner.

"I knew we'd do it!" she cried.

"Good for you!" shouted Russ.

"It's time for you to fall overboard now, Mr. Sneed," directed the manager. "Make a good fall, and put plenty of splash into it."

"Oh dear!" groaned the actor. "I suppose I must!"

In anticipation of this he had donned an old suit of clothes, as had Mr. Bunn, and the latter, for one of very few times, did not wear his tall hat.

"Be ready with your rescue leap," ordered Mr. Pertell to the older actor. "Make it as natural as you can."

The boats had now lost headway, and were coming to a point where Russ could get pictures of the "overboard act."

"I say!" cried Mr. Sneed, as he paused in his preparations to fall, "I have just thought of something!"

"What is it?" asked Mr. Pertell, sharply. "Quick, we are losing time, and getting out of position."

"There are no alligators in this bay; are there?" and Mr. Sneed looked anxiously at the captain of the motor boat.

"Not one," was the laughing answer. "You're safe."

"Then here I go!" cried the grouch, as he toppled overboard, having first "registered" a faint, as directed in the plot of the play.

"Now get him, Mr. Bunn!" cried the manager, and there was another splash, while aboard the boats the proper bits of acting were gone through with, that the camera might catch them.

Page 36

Once they were in the water Mr. Bunn and Mr. Sneed acted their parts well, and the result was a good film. Then, once more aboard the boats, a start was made for the fort, where the final act was to take place.

"I say, me deah fellah!" complained Mr. Towne, as he moved away from Mr. Bunn, who sat near him; "keep a bit off, that's a good chap! I don't want to wet this suit, you know."

"Oh, all right, I beg your pardon," spoke the other.

But Mr. Towne's anxiety for his garments was wasted, for at that moment Mr. Sneed, taking off his coat, wrung some water from it, and of this a considerable quantity splashed on the light suit of Mr. Towne.

"Oh, I say!" the latter cried in dismay. "This won't do, you know!"

"Humph! It seems to me it's already done," observed Paul, with a chuckle.

During the rest of the trip Mr. Towne was kept busy trying to dry up the wet spots with his perfumed handkerchief.

Pop Snooks, the property man, who had little to do when outdoor scenes were being made, was busy with the other moving picture camera on the fort wall, and presently, on the arrival of the company at that place, the final scenes were filmed.

"Wasn't it a dandy race?" cried Alice, as she and her sister, with Russ and Paul, started back to the hotel.

"It was for you because you won, I suppose," remarked Miss Pennington, in a disagreeable tone.

"Not at all," returned Alice, promptly. "It was a glorious race anyhow. Winning didn't count; it was all for the picture."

"That's the way to look at it," said Paul, in her ear. "But, all the same, I'm glad your boat won."

"Thanks," she replied, as she tripped along beside him.

Miss Pennington and Miss Dixon, pausing a moment to "readjust their complexions," as Alice said (for which she was reproved by Ruth), went on by themselves.

The company of players remained in St. Augustine several days, and many fine films resulted, the scenery lending itself particularly well to the camera.

One act in a play took place at the alligator “farm,” on Anastasia Island. There Ruth and Alice saw ‘gators in all stages, from tiny ones just emerging from the shell, to big fourteen-foot ones—regular “man-eaters” they were told.

“Ugh! the horrid creatures!” exclaimed Ruth, who could not repress a shudder.

“They aren’t very pleasant,” agreed Alice. “And to think that perhaps those two girls may be—”

“Oh, my dear! Don’t mention it! I can’t bear to think of such a thing. It’s too horrible!”

“But I suppose there must be many such as that one, in the wilds of the swamps and bayous,” said Alice in a low voice, as she pointed her parasol at a huge saurian.

“If there are any such, I don’t want to know it—or see them,” murmured Ruth, again shuddering. “Oh, I hope we don’t go too far into the wilds.”

Page 37

"So do I," agreed her sister.

That afternoon, calling his company of players together, Mr. Pertell said:

"Friends, we will leave in two days for the interior. I want to get some views along the rivers and bayous, where the scenery is wilder than it is here."

"And where are we going, may I ask?" inquired Mr. DeVere.

"To a place called Sycamore, near Lake Kissimmee," was the answer.

"Oh, Ruth!" exclaimed Alice, impulsively, when she heard this.

"Yes, dear, what is it?"

"Why, that's where those two girls were from—the ones who were lost, you know!"

"Hush! Yes. You know we agreed to say nothing about it, for fear of causing undue alarm. Miss Pennington and Miss Dixon might refuse to go, you know," she went on in a low voice, "and that would make trouble for Mr. Pertell."

"Oh, but isn't it a strange coincidence?" remarked Alice.

"It certainly is. But perhaps the girls have been found by this time."

"Our destination will be Lake Kissimmee," proceeded Mr. Pertell. "We will take some pictures on the lake, some on the Kissimmee River, that connects the lake of that name with Lake Okeechobee, and then we'll go a little way into the wilds, on various streams."

Ruth and Alice looked at each other apprehensively.

CHAPTER XII

A WARNING

"Beg pardon," said Claude Towne, during a pause in which Mr. Pertell was consulting some notes he had jotted down, in order to make matters more clear to his players.

"Beg pardon, my dear sir, but are we going to a *very* wild part of this country?"

"Why, yes—rather so," was the not very reassuring answer. "You probably won't be able to get a room and bath at the hotel where we stop."

"Oh, another one of those backwoods places," murmured Miss Pennington. "How horrid!"

"Is there any—er—any society there?" asked Mr. Towne.

"Hardly," answered the manager, "unless you call the natives society."

"Wretched!" exclaimed the dude, with a wry face.

"Hold on, though!" cried Mr. Pertell, "I believe that there are some of our first families there."

"Ah, that is better," replied Mr. Towne, adjusting his lavender tie. "I shall include my evening clothes in my wardrobe, then."

"I'd advise you to," remarked Mr. Pertell, with an assumption of gravity. "The Seminole Indians, to which I refer, are a very ancient and proud race, I understand, and doubtless a dress suit would appeal to them. They are the first families of Florida!"

"Wretched joke!" muttered the actor. "I think I shall not go into the interior."

"Oh, I think you will," retorted Mr. Pertell, easily. "Your contract calls for it."

"What about alligators?" asked Mr. Sneed.

"You know my offer—a thousand dollars a big bite," laughed the manager. "But I don't fancy we shall see half as many as you saw out at the alligator farm. They are being hunted too fiercely for their skins to allow many to be around loose. Don't worry about them."

Page 38

"And now, friends, if you please, get ready for the trip to Lake Kissimmee. Russ, see to it that you have plenty of film, for we won't be able to get any out there. Now I leave you to make your arrangements."

There was a buzz and a hum of excitement as the players talked over what lay before them. Miss Pennington and Miss Dixon rather shared the disappointment of Mr. Towne that there was no "society" at the place where they were going. But Ruth and Alice, aside from a little feeling of apprehension, and of regret at the fate of the two girls of whom they had read, rather welcomed the coming change.

"It will be a new experience for us," exulted Alice.

"And I hope it will be a pleasant one," rejoined Ruth.

Final visits were paid to points of interest in St. Augustine. It would be some time before they would see it again, as Mr. Pertell intended remaining in the interior for several weeks, and then going back to New York by a different route.

"We must have another drink from the Fountain of Youth," laughed Alice, the day before their departure. "Who knows but what it may preserve us, out in those dismal swamps?"

"Good idea!" commented Paul. "Come on, I'll go with you."

So they went and made merry at the historic well.

Mr. Pertell and Russ had much to do to get ready for the trip. A motor boat had been arranged for to meet the party at Sycamore, where the headquarters would be for most of the work in the wilds of Florida. On this it was planned to take trips on Lake Kissimmee, and the river of that name.

"And we may go as far as Lake Okeechobee," said Russ in speaking of the matter to Ruth.

"That's down among the Everglades; isn't it?" she asked.

"Close to them. I've always wanted to go there, and see what they are like. Now I may get the chance."

"I think I should like to see them, too," she agreed.

"Ruth, you are getting very brave," observed Alice a little later, when the two sisters were packing up in their room.

"Why, dear?"

“To offer to go with Russ to the Everglades.”

“I didn’t offer!”

“It was the same thing, sister mine. It makes a big difference; doesn’t it?”

“Silly!”

Alice laughed.

“I wonder if we ought to take all these light waists?” she asked a little later, holding up a beautiful flimsy one. “It’s sure to be hot there, I suppose.”

“I imagine so. And yet there may be cool and damp evenings. I’d take everything, if I were you.”

“I was thinking of sending some of my things back to Mrs. Dalwood. She promised to look after them, if I did.”

“Oh, I’d take everything. Where did you get that?” Ruth asked curiously, as she held up one of her sister’s garments, ornamented with a peculiar lace.

“At that little Spanish shop we pass every day. Oh, she has some of the most gorgeous things there, and some of the most beautiful! I wish my purse were as long as my desires. But I got this very reasonably.”

Page 39

"Are there any more like it?" asked Ruth, for she, too, liked pretty things.

"There were only two, and I took one."

"Then I'm going to get the other. I can go without ice cream for a week to make up for it. I never saw anything so pretty."

"I'll go with you. She might charge you more than she did me. I had to bargain with her."

"I never knew you could do it," laughed Ruth.

The two girls desisted from their packing long enough to slip out to the lingerie shop, where they spent more time and money than they intended.

The result was they had to hurry at the last minute, and their trunks were hardly strapped before the porter came to take them to the station.

The trip to Sycamore from St. Augustine was rather tedious and tiresome. The railways in the interior of Florida were not like some of the fast lines, and there was not always the luxury of a parlor car.

Miss Pennington and Miss Dixon were rather inclined to murmur about this, but most of the others of the company took the inconveniences in good spirit, even Mr. Towne making the best of it.

He soon found that it was of little use to attire himself in the "height of fashion," and gradually became more sensible in his adornment.

On the trip Russ managed to get a series of films showing different scenes, and at one lonely railroad station, where they had to wait several hours for a connecting train, a little scene was improvised that later was worked into a play.

The few "natives" around the place were much excited at some of the things the players did, and when Paul "saved" Mr. Towne from being run down by a freight train that came along, one grizzled old man was so worked up, thinking it all real, that he wanted to run for a doctor, when Mr. Towne pretended to be hurt.

"An' they do that fer money?" this native inquired, when the matter had been explained to him.

"That's what they do," said Russ, who was putting away his camera.

"Wa'al, all I've got to say is if that's what they call work—I'd rather do nothin'," was the caustic comment.

“And that’s what he jinerally does,” spoke another native, in a low voice. “He’s never worked, an’ I guess he never will.”

“It would be pretty hard to get a *moving* picture of *him*, then,” laughed Russ.

Finally the train, which had been delayed by a slight accident, came along, and the weary players got aboard. In due season they reached Sycamore, a little village near the shores of Lake Kissimmee.

Accommodations had been arranged for in advance, and soon the company was getting settled in the new quarters.

“This is some different from St Augustine,” complained Miss Pennington, who roomed with her friend Miss Dixon.

“I should say so. I’d go back to New York, if I could.”

“So would I. But I guess we’ll have to stay, my dear. Hand me the powder; will you? My face is a wreck from the cinders and dust.”

Page 40

"So's mine." And together they "beautified."

Ruth and Alice were among the first to go down to the parlor to await the ringing of the dinner gong. They strolled up to the desk, to ask the clerk if there was any mail for them, since word had been left at the hotel in St. Augustine to forward any letters.

"Oh, you are with the moving picture company; aren't you?" the clerk asked, as he gave them each a letter. They were from acquaintances they had made at the hotel.

"Yes, we're with the 'movies,'" admitted Alice.

"Going to make all your pictures around here?"

"Not all. We are booked to go into the interior, I believe. Pleasant prospect; isn't it?" she asked with a frank laugh.

"Well, no, I wouldn't say it was," answered the clerk, and he spoke as though Alice had meant to be serious. "In fact, if I were you I wouldn't try to go into the interior around here."

"Why not?" asked Ruth.

"Because it was from here the two girls started out into the wilds to gather rare flowers, and they have not since been heard from!"

CHAPTER XIII

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."

Page 41

"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.”

Page 42

"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.

Page 43

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. DeVere, 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."

CHAPTER XIV

UNDER THE PALMS

"Attention, everyone!"

Mr. Pertell stood on the deck of the *Magnolia*, facing his company of players. At his side was Russ, with the moving picture camera ready for action.

"The first part of this play takes place aboard here," went on the manager. "The action is simple, as you can see from the scenarios I have distributed. Some acts will take place on shore, and when the time comes for that the boat will be sent over to the bank and be tied up. Now then, Russ, get ready to film them. Mr. DeVere, you are in this first act; also Miss Ruth and Miss Dixon. Are you up in your parts?"

Page 44

"Oh, yes," answered the veteran actor. Indeed it did not take him long to become letter perfect, for with him to act was not only second, but first nature.

"I don't just understand how I am to do this part," said Miss Dixon, as she walked over to Mr. Pertell to point out a certain direction. Thereupon he explained it carefully to her.

The company of players was out on the steamer, moving slowly up a quiet stream, one of the tributaries of the Kissimmee River. On either side of the swamp-like stream were tall trees, from which hung, in graceful festoons, streamers of the peculiar growth known as Spanish moss. In the background were palms and other semi-tropical plants. But the growth along the stream itself was so luxuriant that little could be seen except along the banks.

Now and then the quietude, which was unmarred, save by the gentle puffing of the engine, would be disturbed by some big bird, as it forsook its station on a fallen log, startled by the invasion of its domain. Again there would be a splash in the water.

"An alligator!" exclaimed Miss Pennington, as one rather loud splash sounded just beneath where she was leaning on the rail, looking down into the water.

"Where?" cried Russ, eagerly, as he made ready to get some views of it with his camera.

"There!" she said, pointing a trembling finger.

"Oh, don't look at it!" begged Miss Dixon, covering her face with her hands. "Don't look at the horrid thing!"

"No harm in looking at that," laughed Russ. "It's only a log of wood."

And so it proved.

"Well, it looked just like an alligator," protested Miss Pennington, as the others smiled.

"And it sounded like one!" declared Miss Dixon.

"How does an alligator sound?" asked Mr. Towne, who was walking about attired in immaculate white.

"It made a splash."

"So does a bullfrog," observed Paul.

"It does look rather alligatory in there," admitted Alice, as she stood beside the young actor, and gazed into the sluggish stream.

“‘Alligatory’ is a new one,” he remarked. “I wonder if alligators eat alligator pears?”

“Probably,” she laughingly agreed. “There, I guess they’re ready for you, Paul,” for he was to take part in the first scene.

Miss Dixon, having had her difficulty straightened out, was prepared to go on, and soon Russ was again at his usual occupation of turning the handle of the moving picture camera.

For a description of how moving pictures are taken, developed, printed and thrown on the screen in the theater by means of a projecting machine, the reader is referred to the previous books of this series.

“That will do for this part of the drama,” announced Mr. Pertell, when an hour or more had been spent in taking various films. “We will now go ashore. Put her over there,” he called to the man in the pilot house on deck, pointing to a place where, back of the moss-fringed row of trees, could be seen some stately palms.

Page 45

The rather clumsy boat turned slowly toward shore, and a little later had “poked her nose,” as Russ expressed it, against a luxuriant growth of tropical vegetation, in the midst of some low palms and gigantic ferns.

The moist smell of earth and plants, and the odor of flowers was borne on a gentle breeze.

It was a lonely spot, and just what Mr. Pertell wanted for this particular play. On the way up the stream they had passed several small settlements, and the population, consisting mostly of colored folk, had rushed down to the crude landings to stare with big eyes at the passing steamer.

“Everybody ashore!” called the manager, when the boat had been made fast.

“Oh, but we can’t go through there!” complained Mr. Bunn, who, in attempting to make his way into the deeper part of the woods, had suffered the loss of his tall hat several times, low branches having knocked it off.

“Wait, I’ll send some of the hands ahead with axes to clear the way,” offered the steamer captain. “It’ll be easier going, then.”

This was done, and the moving picture players found it no trouble at all to make their way along the hewn path to where a little grove of palms, in a pretty glade, offered the proper scenic background for the pictures.

“This is just the place!” cried the manager. “Russ, set your camera up here, and you’ll get the sun just right. Now, everybody attention!” and he carefully explained what he wanted done.

The play concerned the elopement of a pretty Southern girl, the pursuit by her father, her subsequent marriage, and the forgiveness of her parents. One of the scenes showed the young couple fleeing through the wilderness, and coming to rest beneath the palms, while the pursuers searched in vain for them.

“You’re one of the lovers who has been disappointed by the elopement, Mr. Towne,” said Mr. Pertell, in giving his directions. “When I give the word you must come running along there, so the camera will show you alone.”

“But I may fall in there,” objected the actor, as he pointed you to a small, muddy stream along the path he was to take.

“You must look out for that,” the manager replied. “In fact, I don’t know but what it would be good business to have you fall in. It would seem more realistic.”

"I absolutely refuse to fall in with this new suit on!" cried Mr. Towne, as he glanced at his white flannels.

"Oh, very well, then," conceded the manager.

Russ had his camera in readiness, and, after making views of the two lovers beneath the palms, he called:

"All ready for you, Mr. Towne," and he focused his camera in another direction.

The well-dressed actor came on.

"Oh, run faster!" commanded Mr. Pertell, impatiently. "Act as though you meant it. Put some spirit in it. You are supposed to be desperate because your sweetheart has gone off with another man. You look as though you didn't care!"

Page 46

Thereupon Mr. Towne tried to “register” anger, and succeeded fairly well. But in doing so he forgot to “mind his steps,” and a moment later, in running along the edge of the muddy stream he slipped, and the next moment, in all the glory of his white suit, he splashed into the mud.

CHAPTER XV

IN PERIL

Russ instantly stopped grinding away at the camera handle as he saw Mr. Towne go into the ditch, but the manager, without the loss of a moment, cried:

“Film that, Russ! It’ll be better than the way we were to play it first. Catch him as he comes up!”

“All right!” chuckled the young operator.

“Oh, what a place to fall!” cried Miss Pennington, who was off one side, out of the camera’s range.

“His suit will surely need washing,” remarked Alice.

“Oh, how can you be so heartless?” asked her sister.

“Heartless! Isn’t that the truth?”

Mr. Towne had struggled to his feet. The muddy stream was not very deep.

“Help! Help! Save me!” he cried, as he wiped the water from his face, thereby making many muddy streaks on his countenance.

“You’re in no danger—come on out!” cried Mr. Pertell, trying not to laugh. “Come right toward the camera, Mr. Towne, and register anger and disgust!”

“Register—register!” spluttered the actor. “Do you mean to say you are filming me in this state?”

“I certainly am—it’s a state that will make a hit in the movies!” cried Mr. Pertell. “You might fall down once more, if you don’t mind, Mr. Towne. It will add realism to the film.”

“Fall down again! Never! I will resign first.”

“Very well, I won’t insist on it,” replied the manager, for he felt that it was rather hard on the actor.

But moving picture work is not at all easy, and actors and actresses have to do more disagreeable and dangerous “stunts” than merely falling into a muddy stream. The demand of the public for realism often goes to extremes, and more than once performers have risked their lives at the behest of some enthusiastic manager.

Mr. Pertell was not that sort, however, though he did insist on his players doing a reasonable amount of hard work—and often disagreeable work, as in this case.

But aside from getting wet and muddy, which conditions could be remedied by a bath and dry clothes, the actor suffered no great hardship, except to his pride, and perhaps he had too much of that, anyhow.

“Come on!” cried the manager. “Crawl out of that, and keep on with the chase.”

“Keep on—in this condition! Do you mean it?” Mr. Towne asked.

“Certainly I do. The play must go on. Just because you fell in the ditch is no excuse for stopping it. Keep on! Right along the path. Crawl out and run on.”

“But—but look at my clothes!” complained Mr. Towne. “They are—they’re muddy!”

Page 47

"There is a little mud on them, to be sure," agreed Mr. Pertell. "But don't worry. It will wash off."

"A *little* mud!" spluttered the actor. "I—I—"

"Keep on!" cried the manager. "You are delaying the play!"

The young actor groaned, but there was nothing for it but to obey. He climbed out of the ditch, his once immaculate suit dripping mud from every point, and then he began the pretended chase again, seeking to find the escaping lovers.

Of course this was the farcical element, but managers have found that this is much needed in plays, and though many of them would prefer to eliminate the "horse-play" the audiences seem to demand it, and managers are prone to cater to the tastes of their audiences when they find it pays.

"I'm glad I wasn't cast for that part," remarked the dignified Mr. Bunn, as he saw what Mr. Towne had to go through.

"I'd never consent to it," declared Mr. Sneed. "This business is bad enough as it is," he complained, "without deliberately making it worse. I presume he'll want me to try and catch an alligator next, or drive a sea cow to pasture."

"What's a sea cow?" asked Alice, who had overheard the talk, while Mr. Towne was being filmed in his muddy state.

"The manatee," explained Mr. Sneed. "They are curious animals. They browse around on the bottom of Florida rivers, and sea inlets, as cows do on shore, eating grass. We'll probably see some down here."

"Are they dangerous?" asked Miss Dixon.

"Not as a rule," answered the grouchy actor, who seemed to have taken a sudden interest in this matter. "They might upset a small boat if they accidentally bumped into it, for often they grow to be fourteen feet long, and are like a whale in shape."

"I hope we won't meet with any," observed Ruth. "I can't bear wild animals."

"Manatees are not especially wild," laughed Mr. Sneed, it being one of the few occasions when he did indulge in mirth. "In fact, the earlier forms of manatee were called *Sirenia*, and were considered to be the origin of the belief in mermaids. For they carried their little ones in their fore-flippers, almost as a human mother might do in her arms, and when swimming along would raise their heads out of water, so that they had a faint resemblance to a swimming woman."

“How very odd!” cried Alice. “And are there manatees down here?”

“Many in Florida? Yes,” was the answer. “I suppose we’ll see some if we stay long enough. But I’m going to serve notice on Mr. Pertell now that I refuse to drive any of the sea cows to pasture.”

“I don’t blame you!” laughed Ruth. “Oh, look at Mr. Towne! He’s fallen again!”

And so the unfortunate actor had, but this time into a clump of rough bushes that tore his now nearly ruined white flannels.

“That’s good!” cried Mr. Pertell, approvingly. “You did that very well, Mr. Towne!”

Page 48

"Well, I didn't do it on purpose," the actor protested, as he managed, not without some difficulty, to extricate himself from the briars.

Then he ran on, Russ making picture after picture, while the manager rapidly changed some of the other scenes on the typewritten sheets to conform to the accident of which he had so cleverly made use.

"Mr. Bunn, I have a new part for you, in this same play," the manager said, when Mr. Towne was finally allowed to rest.

"What is it?" asked the older actor. "I hope you can put in something about Shakespeare. I have not had a Shakespearean part in so long that I have almost forgotten how to do it properly."

"I can't promise you that this time," said the manager. "But it just occurred to me that you could also try to trace the escaping lovers, and get stuck in a bog-hole."

"Who, the lovers get stuck in a bog?"

"No, you!"

"Me? Never! I refuse—"

"Now hold on, Mr. Bunn!" said Mr. Pertell, quickly. "I am not asking you to do much. You need not get in the bog deeper than up to your knees. That will answer very well. You can pretend it is a sort of quicksand bog and that you are sinking deeper and deeper. You call for help, and Mr. Switzer comes to get you out."

"I refuse to do it!" cried the actor.

"And I insist!" declared Mr. Pertell, sharply. "Your contract calls for any reasonable amount of work, and to wade into a bog knee-deep is not unreasonable."

"But I will spoil my shoes and trousers."

"No matter, I will provide you with new ones. You need not sacrifice your tall hat this time."

"That is one comfort," sighed the old actor. "Well, I suppose there is no help for it. Where is the bog hole?"

"I think this one will do," said the manager, pointing to one where Mr. Towne had fallen into the mud. "You will come along, pretending to look for the fleeing lovers, and you will unwittingly wade out into the bog. There you will struggle to release yourself, but

you will be unable to, and will call for help. Mr. Switzer, who is also on the trail, will respond and he will wade out and save you."

"Excuse me," remarked the German actor, softly, "but vy iss it necessary dot I rescue him?"

"Why he can't rescue himself," declared Mr. Pertell. "You've got to do it."

"No, dot I did not mean. I meant dot as Herr Towne iss alretty wet and muddy, dot he could as vell do der rescue act."

"That's so. It will be better!" said the manager. "I didn't think of that. I'll have Towne do it. He can come along on the film right after he's pulled himself out of the ditch. Fix it up that way, Russ."

"All right, Mr. Pertell."

"Have I got to go in more mud and water?" demanded the fastidious actor.

"Yes," replied the manager. "But it won't be much. Just a few feet or so of film."

Page 49

Mr. Towne groaned, but there was no help for it. And really he could not get much muddier.

Accordingly, after some intervening scenes had been filmed to make the action of the story, as revised, more plausible, Russ moved his camera near the bog hole, ready to get views of Mr. Bunn, when he should stumble into it, and also Mr. Towne, when the latter came to the rescue.

"All ready now—let her go!" called the manager. "Come along, Mr. Bunn."

The old actor advanced, but evidently with very little liking for his part.

"Oh, be more natural!" cried Mr. Pertell. "You are supposed to be the father of the young man who is eloping, and you want to prevent him. Put some spirit into your work!"

Thereupon Mr. Bunn tried, and with better success. But when he came to the edge of the bog hole he hesitated.

"Hold on! Stop the camera!" cried the manager, sharply. "That won't do at all. This must be spontaneous. Run right along, and don't stop when you see the bog hole. Plunge right into it. Why, it isn't up to your knees, Mr. Bunn, and the weather is hot."

"All right, here I go!" he said, resignedly.

"Wait! Go back and do that last bit over again," ordered the manager. "Russ, cut out the last few pictures and substitute these that are to come. Now, Mr. Bunn!"

The Shakespearean actor started over again, and he was "game" enough to pretend that he did not in the least mind floundering into the bog hole. As he came to the edge of it, in he plunged.

He went down much deeper than to his knees, and as he felt himself sinking he called out:

"Help! Help! Save me! Save me!"

"That's it! That's the way to do it! That's being what I call realistic!" shouted Mr. Pertell, who always waxed enthusiastic over a new idea.

Mr. Bunn continued to sink in the bog. He pulled and struggled to get out, apparently without success. Then his tall hat fell off from the violence of his exertions, and he barely saved it from a muddy bath.

"Help! Help! I'm sinking!" he cried.

“Good! That’s the way to act it!” encouraged Mr. Pertell. “Now, Mr. Towne, you come up to the rescue in a few seconds. Don’t mind the mud, either. Go right out to him. You can’t be much worse off.”

“Indeed I cannot,” agreed the other, as he glanced at his soiled suit.

“Wait just a minute more,” said Mr. Pertell to the prospective rescuer. “Give him a chance to struggle more. It will look better.”

“No, let him come at once and save me! Save me at once!”

“Why?” the manager wanted to know.

“Because I really am sinking! This isn’t play! The quicksand has me in its grip!”

And, as Mr. Pertell looked about, unable to tell whether the actor was saying that as part of the “business,” or because he was in earnest, the unfortunate man cried out in real anguish:

Page 50

"Save me! Save me! I am in the quicksand and it's sucking me down!"

"That's right! He is in a quicksand bog!" cried one of the steamer hands who had helped hew a path through the swamp. "He'll never get out if you don't help him quick!"

CHAPTER XVI

A STRANGE ATTACK

It was true, then. The frantic appeals of Mr. Bunn were not in the interests of acting for moving pictures, but because he felt himself in actual danger. None of his friends had thought of that, until the man from the steamer offered confirmation. They had all thought the actor was doing a realistic bit of work.

"Quicksand! Do you mean it?" gasped Mr. Pertell.

"I certainly do," answered the steamer hand. "There are a lot of those bogs around here, and he's stumbled into one. He's going down every minute, too, and if you don't get him out soon you never will."

"Oh, mercy!" screamed Miss Pennington. "How horrible!"

"To be buried alive!" gasped Miss Dixon.

"Quiet!" commanded Mr. Pertell, sternly. "Come on, gentlemen!" he called to the male members of the company. "We must save him!"

"Oh, do get me out!" cried the unfortunate Mr. Bunn.

"We'll save you!" shouted the manager, as he made a dash toward the bog hole. He was followed by Mr. DeVere, Paul and some of the others.

"Keep back!" yelled the man from the steamer. "If you get in you won't get out either."

"But they must save him!" cried Alice, who had gone forward with her father.

"They can't save him by getting into the quicksand themselves!" pointed out the man who seemed to know the deadly nature of the bog. "The only way is to fling him a rope."

"A rope! There isn't one nearer than the steamer!" cried Mr. Pertell.

"I'll go get it!" offered Mr. Switzer. "I am a goot runner!"

"It will be too late, I'm afraid," objected the steamer hand. "He is sinking faster now."

This was indeed but too true. Whereas at first the clinging mud and sand of the bog hole had only been up to Mr. Bunn's knees, he was now engulfed to his waist.

"We'll have to make a rope!" cried Mr. Towne. "Tear up our coats, or something like that."

"I know a way, Ruth," declared Alice. "We have on two skirts. The under one is of heavy cloth. Couldn't we tear those into strips—?"

"Of course! How wise of you to think of it!" replied the other girl. "Daddy, we can provide a rope!" she cried, and she quickly whispered to him what Alice had suggested.

"The very thing!" he agreed. "Quick, slip behind the bushes there and remove your underskirts. I'll have my knife ready to slit it into strips."

While the two moving picture girls retired for a moment their father quickly explained their plan.

"And you may have our skirts, too," said Miss Pennington. "Only mine is of such thin material—"

Page 51

"So is mine, unfortunately," added Miss Dixon.

"Fortunately I think the two skirts of my daughters will be sufficient," said Mr. DeVere, as he opened his keen-bladed knife.

"Oh, I am going down!" cried Mr. Bunn, in anguished tones.

"Here are the skirts!" cried Alice, as she came out with her own and Ruth's over her arm.

Ready hands aided Mr. DeVere in cutting the stout material into strips that were quickly knotted together, making a strong rope.

"It's a shame to spoil your suit," said Paul to Alice.

"It doesn't matter. The skirts were only cheap ones, of khaki cloth, but they are very strong. I am glad we wore them."

"And I guess Mr. Bunn will be, too," added the young actor.

"Now we'll have you out!" cried Mr. DeVere, as he flung one end of the novel rope to the actor in the bog. Mr. Bunn caught it, and, at the direction of Mr. Pertell, looped it about his chest, just under his arms.

"Now, all pull together!" cried the manager. "But take it gradually, until we see what strain this rope will stand."

Indeed a slow, gradual pull was the only feasible method of releasing Mr. Bunn. But with the rope around him, he felt that he was going to be saved, and did not struggle so violently.

Often when one gets into a quicksand bog the more one struggles the faster and deeper one sinks. Only it is almost impossible not to struggle against the impending fate.

With the skirt-rope about him, and his friends pulling on it, Mr. Bunn's hand were free. Seeing this, and realizing that the more force that was applied, up to a certain point, the sooner would the actor be freed, Ruth cried:

"If we had another rope we girls could help, and Mr. Bunn could hold on to it with his hands," for she and her sister, as well as Miss Pennington and Miss Dixon, were doing nothing.

"Let's go to the steamer and get one," proposed Miss Dixon.

"It would be too late," declared Alice. Then, as she looked about the little clearing where the accident had taken place she saw, dangling from a tree, a long vine of some creeping plant. There were several stems twined together.

"There's our rope!" she cried. "That vine!"

"Oh, Alice! How splendid!" exclaimed her sister. "You think of everything!"

"Well, let's stop thinking, and work!" suggested the younger girl. "They need all the help they can get to pull Mr. Bunn out of that bog."

Together the girls managed to get off a long piece of the stout vine, which made a most excellent substitute for a rope.

"I suppose if I had thought of this first we needn't have cut our skirts," said Alice.

"I'm not sorry we didn't," was her sister's reply.

"Nor am I!"

"Catch this, Mr. Bunn!" called Alice, as with the vine rope she went as near the bog hole as was safe.

Page 52

“Good idea! Great!” cried Mr. Pertell. “You moving picture girls are as good as men!”

“Better!” declared Mr. Bunn, who was over his fright now. He caught the end of the vine Alice flung to him, and held on grimly as the four girls prepared to tug on their portion.

With this added strength the plight of the actor was soon relieved. Slowly but surely he was pulled from the sticky mud, and, a little later, he was safely hauled out on the firm bank.

“Thank the Lord for that!” exclaimed Mr. Pertell, reverently, as he saw that his employe was safe. “I should never have forgiven myself if—if anything had happened to you. For it was my suggestion that you go in the bog. My dear man, can you forgive me?” and he held out his hand to Mr. Bunn, while his voice grew husky, and there was a suspicious moisture in his eye.

“That’s all right,” responded Mr. Bunn, generously, and he seemed to have added something to his nature through his nerve-racking experience. He had been near death, or at least the possibility of it, and it had meant much to him.

“Don’t blame yourself, Mr. Pertell,” he went on. “I went into the hole with my eyes open. Neither of us knew the quicksand was there. And I suppose we must accept with this business the risks that go with it.”

“Yes, it is part of the game,” admitted the manager; “but I want none of my players to take unnecessary risks. I shall be more careful in the future.”

Mr. Bunn was quite exhausted from his experience, and, as the affair had tried the nerves of all, it was decided to give up picture work for the rest of the day.

“I can’t help regretting, though,” said Mr. Pertell, as they were on their way back to the steamer, “that we didn’t get a moving picture of that. It would have made a great film—better even than the one I had planned.”

“Oh, but I did get views of it!” cried Russ, with a laugh, that did much to relieve the strain they were all under.

“You did!” exclaimed the manager, in surprise.

“Yes,” went on the young operator, “when I saw that there were enough of you hauling Mr. Bunn out, I thought I might as well take advantage of the situation and get pictures. So I have the whole rescue scene here,” and he tapped his moving picture camera.

“I am glad you have!” exclaimed the Shakespearean actor, heartily. “As long as I had to go through with it we might as well have the Comet Company get the benefit of it.”

Back through the tropical forest and swamp they went, until they reached the steamer. There Mr. Bunn and Mr. Towne enjoyed the luxury of a good bath, and their clothes were cleaned.

Alice came in for much praise, for it was her quick wit, in a way, that had enabled Mr. Bunn to be so promptly saved.

“And to replace your daughters’ spoiled skirts, Mr. DeVere,” said the manager, in speaking of the matter later, “I beg that I may be allowed to get them whole new suits.”

Page 53

"Oh, that is too much," protested the actor.

"Indeed it is not!" declared Mr. Pertell. "I am also going to give each player a bonus on his or her salary, and to Mr. Bunn, for what he suffered, a special bonus."

A day or so later the film, in which Mr. Bunn had figured in the quicksand, was finished, and then came the announcement that they would proceed on down the river to a new location, so as to get a different scenic background for the filming of a new drama.

Some of the scenes of this took place on the steamer, and then, when the captain announced that he would have to tie up for half a day to enable the "roustabouts" to go ashore and cut wood for the boiler, Mr. Pertell said:

"Then we'll go ashore, too. I want to get some pictures in which a small boat will figure. So we'll take the camera along, Russ, and get some of those views I spoke of."

Some scenes ashore were filmed, and then, carrying out the idea of the drama, Ruth and Alice, with Paul Ardite, got into a small boat.

They were to go down stream a little way, and there go through certain "business" called for in the play. Paul was to row.

The boat floated under the arching moss and vines that trailed from the trees on the bank. Now and then a snag would be struck, and on such occasions Ruth would start nervously, and cry out:

"Alligators!"

"Oh, please stop!" begged Alice, after two or three of these scares. "I don't believe there's an alligator within ten miles of us."

"Of course not," agreed Paul.

All this while Russ was getting films of the boat containing the two moving picture girls. He was following in another boat.

"Steady there!" he called, at a certain point. "Better toss over your anchor, and stay there a while. I want a long film of this scene."

"All right," agreed Paul, and with a splash the little anchor went over the side. The boat swung around and then became stationary. Russ was grinding away at the camera when, suddenly, the boat he was filming, with its occupants, began moving up stream.

"Hold on!" he warned. "I don't want you to move yet!"



"I'm not moving!" retorted Paul.

"But the boat is going—and up stream!" cried Alice.

"Oh, Paul!" exclaimed Ruth. "What has happened?"

At the same moment the craft careened violently, and a bulky object rose partly from the water in front of it.

"An alligator has attacked us!" screamed Alice.

CHAPTER XVII

OUT OF A TREE

Paul sprang to his feet with such suddenness that he nearly upset the boat, and the girls shrieked in even greater fright.

"Sit down! Oh, sit down!" Alice begged him.

"Russ! Russ!" cried Ruth. "It's an alligator!"

"It can't be!" declared the young moving picture operator. He had stopped working his camera, and was urging the two men from the steamer, who were rowing his boat, to make better progress.

Page 54

"Deed an' dere am 'gators in dish yeah ribber!" declared one of the colored men.

"Don't let the girls hear you say that!" cautioned Russ.

Paul had obeyed the request of the girls to sit down, but he crawled toward the bow of the boat, which was now moving through the water, up stream, at a fair rate of speed.

"What is it? Oh, what is it?" implored Alice.

"Can you see anything?" Ruth wanted to know.

"Some sort of animal has got hold of our anchor, or the rope," declared Paul, "and it's towing us. I don't think it can be an alligator, though."

"Oh, what will become of us?" gasped Ruth.

"Don't be in the least alarmed!" exclaimed Paul. "All I'll have to do will be to cut the rope, and we'll be free. But I don't want to lose the anchor."

"Don't cut loose! Don't!" cried Russ, whose boat was now up to that containing the two girls and the young actor. "I want to get a film of that. You're not in any real danger; are you?"

"Oh, yes indeed we are!" said Ruth.

"Nonsense! We aren't at all!" protested her sister. "Only I'd like to see what sort of a fish is towing us."

"It isn't a fish at all!" Paul suddenly exclaimed. "It's a manatee—a sea cow!"

"Oh, a sea cow! I want to look at it!" Alice cried.

"You must keep quiet in the boat!" insisted Ruth, who seemed greatly afraid.

"Silly! I won't upset you," was the answer. "But I want to get a glimpse of that creature. There is no danger; is there, Paul?"

"Sea cows are considered gentle, and seldom attack," he replied. "You can see it quite plainly now. It is swimming near the top of the water."

Alice made her way forward, and even Ruth was induced to come and look at the strange creature, while Russ, from his boat, took views of the occurrence.

"The anchor seems to be caught under one of its flippers," said Paul. "That's why it's towing us. Probably the manatee wants to get rid of us as much as you girls want to get rid of it."

"I hope it doesn't get away for a few minutes!" called out Russ. "This will make a dandy film!"

Much reassured now by the gentle movements of the manatee, Ruth lost nearly all of her fear. Alice really had felt very little.

"I thought it surely was an alligator," the latter said, as the boat continued to be towed by the manatee.

"Nebber knowed one ob dem t'ings t' come so far up de ribber," declared one of the colored men. "He's a big one, too!" he added, as his eyes bulged.

"How large is it, Russ?" asked Paul. "You can see better than we can."

"Oh, about twelve feet long, I guess. There, I got a good view of him then!" he cried, as the manatee, probably in an effort to get rid of the rope, rose partly from the water.

"Oh, what a horrid looking thing!" cried Ruth.

"I don't think so at all," Alice said. "I wish I could see it from in front."

Page 55

She had her wish a moment later, and it was rather more than she bargained for since the sea cow, in an effort to get rid of the rope that was twisted about its flipper, turned about with a swirl in the water, not unlike that made by the propeller of a motor boat, and came head-on for the craft it was unwittingly towing.

"Oh, it will upset us!" cried Ruth.

"Never mind! They don't bite, and we'll rescue you!" Russ reassured her.

"Oh, I—I'd die, sure, if I were to be thrown into the water with that terrible creature!" gasped Ruth, clinging to Alice for protection.

And there did seem some likelihood of the manatee upsetting the boat, not so much through a vindictive spirit, as by accident, and because of its huge bulk.

On it surged toward the craft, and Paul, seizing an oar, prepared to attack. Russ called to his rowers to be ready to rescue the girls and the young actor if necessary, and then, with the desire for a good film ever uppermost in his mind, he continued to grind away at the camera crank.

"This will be a peach of a film!" he exulted.

"Oh, Paul! Is it going to attack us?" asked Ruth.

Paul did not answer, but jabbed with his oar at the manatee and struck it on the head. The sea cow dived, and this produced the desired result, for the rope slipped off its flipper, and it was free. It went under the boat, rubbed along on the keel with its back a short distance, causing Ruth and Alice to scream as their craft careened, and then vanished for good.

"Oh, thank goodness! It's gone!" gasped Ruth.

Their boat began to drop down stream, until the dragging anchor caught and held it. Russ now ceased to work the camera.

"I don't know just how we can incorporate that scene in this drama," he admitted; "but I suppose Mr. Pertell can find a way. He generally does. Now, if you girls are up to it, we'll finish with the regular play. I'll have to slip in some new film, though."

"Oh, I guess we can go on, after we quiet down a bit," Ruth said, and a little later she and her sister, with Paul, went through with the business of the play as originally laid down in the scenario.

"What a strange experience!" observed Ruth, as they were returning to the steamer.

“Wasn’t it?” agreed Alice.

Mr. Pertell, after properly sympathizing with the girls, declared himself delighted with the unexpected film of the manatee.

“I tell you we didn’t make any mistake coming to Florida,” he said. “We’ll get pictures here that no other company can touch.”

And later this was found to be so, for the films made under the palms created quite a sensation when shown in New York.

Mr. DeVere, as usual, was somewhat perturbed when he learned what his daughters had gone through, and again expressed his doubts as to the advisability of keeping them in moving picture work.

Page 56

"Oh, but that might have happened to anyone—if we were out after orchids, instead of being filmed," protested Alice. "I don't ever want to think of giving up this work."

"Nor do I!" added Ruth, with more energy than she usually exhibited.

The players were out in the palm forest. It was several days after the episode of the manatee, and the steamer, with a plentiful supply of wood fuel, had gone up another sluggish stream, some miles farther on.

Quite an elaborate drama was to be filmed and the "full strength of the company," as Paul laughingly said, was required. Even little Tommy and Nellie were to be used in some of the scenes.

"Isn't it wild and desolate in here?" remarked Ruth, with a little shudder as they penetrated deeper and deeper into the forest, for Mr. Pertell wanted a certain background.

"It *is* lonesome," agreed Alice. "Whenever I get to a place like this I think of those two missing girls."

"So do I! Isn't it too bad about them? I wonder if they can have been found by this time?"

"Let us hope so," said Alice, in a low voice.

It took some little time to arrange for making this new film, and in the first scenes neither Ruth nor Alice were required. They wandered off to one side, remaining within call, however.

"There's an orchid!" exclaimed Alice, as she pointed to a beautiful bloom, clinging to a tree. Seemingly it drew its nourishment from the air alone.

"How beautiful!" remarked Ruth. "I wonder if we could get it?"

"I can climb the tree," declared her sister. "I have on an old skirt. I'll get it."

She did, after some little difficulty, and as she was bringing it to Ruth, Alice looked through an opening between the trees, and exclaimed:

"Oh, there are Tommy and Nellie. They are after flowers too, for they each have a handful. But I must call to them. They should not wander too far away."

Together she and Alice, admiring the orchid, advanced toward the two children, who had come to a halt under a big sycamore.

Then, as Alice was about to call, she uttered an exclamation of terror.

“See!” she whispered hoarsely to Ruth. “That creature in the tree—right over their heads, and it is crouching for a leap!”

Ruth looked and saw a tawny beast with laid-back ears and twitching tail, stretched on a big limb a short distance above the ground, and right over the two children, who were innocently prattling away, and looking at the flowers they had gathered.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ANIMATED LOGS

For a moment Alice and Ruth were almost paralyzed with fear. They stood spellbound, and could only gaze horrifiedly at the tawny beast stretched out on the limb of the tree.

“What—what shall we do?” asked Alice.

“What can we do?” Ruth returned. “If we move toward them, or call out, the beast may spring on them. What is it—a tiger?”

Page 57

"I don't know. Of course it's not a tiger, for there are none in this country except in circuses. Maybe it's a wildcat."

"Oh, they are terrible. But this doesn't look like the wildcat Flaming Arrow shot in the backwoods."

"No, it doesn't," agreed Alice. "But we must do something to save those children!"

Tommy and Nellie, all unconscious of their peril, were still sorting their blossoms beneath the tree.

"If we could only get them out of the way—somehow," urged Alice. "Then we might hurry off before the beast could spring."

"But it might chase after us—and them."

"That's so. One of us had better go for help. You—you go, Alice. I—I'll stay here," faltered Ruth.

"What! Leave you alone with that beast? I will not!"

"But what can we do?"

Alice thought for a moment. The animal in the tree had apparently not seen them—its attention was fixed on the two children. Then, as the girls watched, they saw it move slightly, while its tail twitched faster.

"It's getting ready to spring!" whispered Alice.

"Oh, don't say that!" begged Ruth, clasping her hands.

They really did not know what to do. They were some distance from the others of the moving picture company, and to go to them, and summon help, might mean the death or injury of the children.

On the other hand, to call out suddenly, or to rush toward the little ones, might precipitate the attack of the beast.

And then fate, or luck, stepped in and changed the situation of affairs. Tommy spied another blossom—a brighter one than any he had yet gathered and he cried out:

"Oh, look at that pretty flower! I'm going to get it!"

"No, let me!" exclaimed his sister, and the two got up with that suddenness which seems so natural to children, and sped across a little glade, out from under the tree, with its dangerous beast toward a clump of ferns and flowers.

It was the best, and perhaps the only thing, they could have done.

"Oh—oh!" gasped Ruth. It was all she could say.

"Now they are safe," Alice ventured.

But not yet.

The beast had been about to spring and now, with a snarl of disappointed rage, it bounded lightly from the limb of the tree to the ground, and began a slinking advance upon the children.

"Oh!" screamed Ruth, and her cry of alarm was echoed by her sister. Both girls instinctively started forward, but an instant later they were halted by a voice.

"Stand where ye are, young ladies. I'll attend to that critter!"

Before they had a chance to look and see who it was that had called, a shot rang out and the beast, which had been running along, crouched low like a cat after a bird, seemed to crumple up. Then it turned a complete somersault, and a moment later lay motionless.

Tommy and Nellie, hearing the report of the gun, paused in their rush after the bright flowers, and then, as they saw the big animal not far from them, they uttered cries of fear, and clung to each other.

Page 58

"It's all right, dears! There's no danger now!" called Ruth, as she sped toward them.

Alice paused but a moment to look at the individual who had in such timely and effective fashion come to the rescue. She saw a tall, gaunt man, attired in ragged clothes, bending forward with ready rifle, to be prepared to take a second shot if necessary.

"I don't reckon he'll bother any one no more," said this man, with a satisfied chuckle, as he leaned on his gun, the butt of which he dropped to the ground. "I got him right in the head."

"Oh—we—we can't thank you enough!" gasped Alice. "The—the children—" but her voice choked, and she could not speak.

"Wa'al, I reckon he *might* have clawed 'em a bit," admitted the man with the gun. "And perhaps it's jest as well I come along when I did. You folks live around here? Don't seem like I've met you befo'."

"We're a company of moving picture actresses and actors," explained Alice, while Ruth, making a detour to avoid the dead body of the animal, went to Tommy and Nellie, who were still holding on to each other.

"Picture-players; eh?" mused the hunter, for such he evidently was. "I seen a movin' picture once, and it looked as real as anything. Be you folks on that steamer?"

"The *Magnolia*—yes," answered Alice, as her sister led the children up to her.

"You're all right now, dearies," said Ruth. "The nice man killed the bad bear."

"Excuse me, Miss; but that ain't a bear," said the hunter, with a pull at his ragged cap that was meant for a bow. "It's a bobcat—mountain lion some folks calls 'em—and I don't know as I ever saw one around this neighborhood before. Mostly they're farther to the no'th. This must be a stray one."

"Oh, but it might have killed us all if you had not been here," Ruth went on.

"Oh, no, Miss, beggin' your pardon. It wouldn't have been as bad as that. Most-ways these bobcats would rather run than fight. I reckon if it had seen you young ladies it would have run."

"Are we as scary as all that?" asked Alice, with a nervous little laugh.

"Oh, no, Miss. I didn't mean it that way at all," said the man. "I beg your pardon, I'm sure. But a bobcat won't hardly ever attack a grown person, unless it's cornered. I reckon this one must have been riled about suthin' and thought to claw up the tots a bit."

I happened to be around, so I jest natcherally plunked him—beggin' your pardon for mentionin' the matter."

"It was awfully good of you," murmured Ruth, who had Tommy's and Nellie's hands now.

"Won't you tell us who you are?" asked Alice, as she introduced herself and her sister.

"Who—me? Oh, I'm Jed Moulton," replied the hunter. "I'm an alligator hunter by callin'. But they're gittin' a bit scarce now, so I'm on the move."

"I wish you'd come back and meet our friends," suggested Ruth. "Mrs. Maguire, the children's grandmother, will want to thank you for what you have done."

Page 59

“Wa’al, I’m in no special rush, and I reckon I can spare a little time,” agreed Jed. “But I ain’t much used to havin’ a fuss made over me.”

“You can see how moving pictures are made,” suggested Alice.

“Can I, Miss? Then I’ll come,” and shouldering his gun he set off with them.

“Are you going to leave the bobcat there?” asked Ruth.

“Yes, Miss. Its skin ain’t really no good this time of year, and I don’t want to bother with it. The buzzards’ll make short work of it. Leave it lie.”

There was considerable excitement among the other players when the girls and children came back, accompanied by Jed, and told of their adventure.

Much was made over the alligator hunter, and Mrs. Maguire was profuse in her thanks. Then, in the next breath, she scolded the tots for wandering so far away.

“I think they won’t do it again,” said Ruth, with a smile, as she recalled their fright.

“No, sir! Never no more!” declared Tommy, earnestly.

Bad as the scare had been, its effects were not lasting, and Ruth and Alice were able to take their part in the drama that was being filmed. Jed Moulton looked on, his eyes big with wonder.

“That beats shootin’ bobcats!” he declared at the conclusion of the performance.

Jed at once became a favorite with all, and when Mr. Pertell learned that he was quite a successful hunter he made him an offer.

“You come along with us,” the manager urged. “I want to get a film of alligator hunting, and I’ll make it worth your while to do some of your stunts before the camera. I’ll pay you well, and you can have all the alligators you shoot.”

“Say, that suits me—right down to the ground!” cried Jed, heartily. “I’ll take you up on that.”

So Jed became attached to the moving picture outfit, and a cheerful and valuable addition he proved. For he knew the country like a book, and offered valuable suggestions as to where new and striking scenic backgrounds could be obtained.

An uneventful week followed the episode of the bobcat. The *Magnolia* went up and down sluggish streams and bayous, while the company of players acted their parts, or rested beneath the palms and under the graceful Spanish moss.

“But it is getting lonesome and tiresome—being away from civilization so long,” complained Miss Pennington one day. “We can’t get any mail, or anything.”

“Who wants mail, when you can sit out on deck and look at such a scene as that?” asked Alice, pointing to a view down a beautiful river.

“Don’t you want to come for a row?” asked Paul of Alice, after luncheon.

“I think so,” she answered. “Where is Ruth?”

“We’ll all go together,” he proposed. “Russ wants to get a few pictures, and Jed Moulton is going along to show us where there are some likely spots for novel scenes.”

“Of course I’ll come!” cried Alice, enthusiastically, as she went to her stateroom to make ready.

Page 60

A little later the four young people, with the alligator hunter, set out in a big rowboat. Russ took with him a small moving picture camera, as he generally did, even when he had no special object in view.

They rowed up the stream in which the *Magnolia* was resting, her bow against a fern bank, and presently the party was in a solitude that was almost oppressive. There was neither sign nor sound of human being, and the steamer was lost to sight around a bend in the stream.

"Isn't it wonderful here?" murmured Ruth.

"It certainly is," agreed Russ who, with Paul, was rowing.

"It sure is soothin'," said Jed. "Many a time when I ain't had no luck, and feel all tuckered out, I sneak off to a place like this and I feel jest glad to be alive."

He put it crudely enough, but the others understood his homely philosophy.

They rowed slowly, pausing now and then to gather some odd flower, or to look at some big tree almost hidden under the mass of Spanish moss.

Alice, who had gone to the bow, was looking ahead, when suddenly she called out:

"Oh, look at the funny logs! They're bobbing up and down all over. See!"

Jed and the others looked to where she pointed, toward a sand bar in the stream. Then the old hunter called out:

"Logs! Them ain't logs! Them's alligators! We've run into a regular nest of 'em! I'm glad I brought my gun along!"

"Oh! Alligators!" gasped Ruth, as one thrust his long and repulsive head from the water, just ahead of the boat.

CHAPTER XIX

INTO THE WILDS

Had there been any convenient mode of running away Ruth and Alice would certainly have taken advantage of it just then. But they were out in a boat, in the middle of a wide, sluggish stream, and all about them, swimming, diving, coming up and crawling over a long sand-bar, were alligators—alligators on all sides. They were surrounded by them now, and the girls would no more have gotten out of the boat, even if there had been a bridge nearby on which to walk to shore, than they would have dived overboard.

“Oh, isn’t it awful!” gasped Ruth, covering her eyes with her hands.

“Can they get at us?” asked Alice, more practically.

“Not if you stay in the boat, I should say,” declared Paul. But he was not altogether sure in his own mind.

As for Russ he said nothing. But he was busy focusing the small moving picture camera on the unusual scene. True, he had views of the saurians at the alligator farm near St. Augustine, but this was different. The views he was now getting showed the big, repulsive creatures in their natural haunts.

“This sure is a big piece of luck!” cried Jed Moulton, as he brought his rifle up from the bottom of the boat. “It is a rare bit of luck! I didn’t know there was so many ‘gators in this neighborhood!”

Page 61

"Oh, are you going to shoot?" cried Ruth, as she saw the old hunter prepare to take aim.

"Well, that's what I was countin' on, Miss," he replied. "I can't exactly get a 'gator without shootin' him. They won't come when you call 'em, you know. But if it's goin' to distress you, Miss, why of course I can—"

"Oh, no!" she cried hastily. "Of course I don't want to deprive you of making a living. That was selfish of me. Only I was afraid if you shot from the boat it might upset, and if we were thrown into the water with all those horrid things—ugh!"

She could not finish.

"I guess you're right, Miss," assented Jed. "It will be better not to shoot from the boat, especially as we've got a pretty good load in, and my gun is a heavy one, though it don't recoil such an awful lot. Now we'll take you girls back to the steamer, and then I'll come here and make a bag—an alligator bag, you might say," he added with grim humor.

"Oh, I want to stay and see you shoot!" cried Alice, impulsively.

"Oh, no, Alice!" cried her sister. "Daddy wouldn't like it, you know."

"Well, perhaps not," admitted the younger girl, more readily than her sister had hoped. "Shooting alligators is not exactly nice work, I suppose, however much it needs to be done, for we have to have their skins for leather."

"Then suppose you take us back," suggested Ruth. "I'm sorry to make so much trouble ____"

"Not at all!" interrupted Paul. "I think it will be best. But if I can borrow a gun I'm going to get a 'gator myself."

"And get one for me; will you, Paul?" begged Alice. "I'll have my valise after all!"

"Surely," he answered.

"Just a few minutes more," requested Russ. "There's a big one over there I want to film. I guess he must be the grandfather of this alligator roost."

"I never saw such a nest of 'em!" exclaimed Jed. "I can make a pot of money out of this. None of the other hunters has stumbled on it. I'm in luck!"

Ruth and Alice had lost much of their first fear, and really the only danger now was lest one of the big saurians upset the boat, which it might easily do, by coming up under it. The alligators showed no disposition to make an attack. Indeed, most of them swam

past the boat without noticing it, though a few of the smaller ones scuttled off when they came up and eyed the craft and its occupants.

Out on the sand bar, sunning themselves, were nearly a score of the big creatures. Now and then one would crawl over the others, or plunge into the sluggish stream with a splash.

“Some fine skins here,” commented Jed, with a professional air. “When we come back, boys, we’ll have a lively time.”

“Isn’t it dangerous?” asked Ruth, with a shudder.

“Alligators ain’t half so dangerous as folks think,” said Jed. “I’ve hunted ’em, boy and man, for years, and I never got much hurt. One I wounded once nipped me on the leg, and I’ve got the scar yet.”

Page 62

"I thought it was the tail that was the dangerous part of an alligator," said Russ, who now had all the pictures he wanted for the present, though he intended coming back with the larger camera and filming the alligator hunt.

"Well, I've read lots of stories to the effect that an alligator or crocodile could swing his tail around and knock a man or dog into his mouth with one sweep, but I don't believe it," the hunter said. "Of course that big tail could do damage if it was properly used, and you didn't get out of the way in time. In India I reckon the crocodiles are dangerous, if what you read is true; but I don't reckon a Florida alligator nor crocodile ever ate a man."

"I thought there were no crocodiles in this country," said Russ, who, with a skillful movement of the oars, avoided hitting a big alligator.

"That's a mistake," said Jed. "There are both alligators and crocodiles in Florida, and some of the crocodiles grow to be nearly fifteen feet long. There ain't so much difference between crocodiles and alligators as folks think. The main point is that a crocodile's head is more pointed than an alligator's."

"They're all horrid enough looking," observed Alice.

"Wa'al, I grant you they ain't none of 'em beauties," returned the hunter, with a chuckle, "though I have heard of some folks takin' home little alligators for pets. I'd as soon have a pet bumblebee!" and he laughed heartily.

The two girls were becoming almost indifferent to the alligators now, though in turning about for the return trip to the steamer they several times bumped into the clumsy creatures, and once the craft careened dangerously, causing Alice and Ruth to scream.

And once, when they were almost out of the haunts of the saurians, an immense specimen reared itself out of the water and thrust its ugly nose over the bow.

"Oh!" cried Alice, shrinking back.

In an instant Jed fired, aiming, however, along the keel of the boat, and not broadside across it, so there was no danger from the recoil.

The alligator sank at once.

"I hit him!" cried the hunter, "but it wasn't a mortal wound. I'll come back and get him."

"Please don't shoot again!" begged Ruth.

"I won't, Miss, and I beg your pardon; but I really couldn't help it," he apologized.

There was considerable excitement aboard the *Magnolia* when the party returned with word about the alligators, and when Paul and Russ went back with Jed, Russ taking a large camera, another boatload of men with guns was made up for the hunt.

Even Jed was satisfied later with the day's work, and Russ got a film that created quite a sensation when shown, for never before had an alligator hunt been given in moving pictures.

"Well, I can't go on with you folks any longer," said Jed that night, as Mr. Pertell, aboard the *Magnolia*, was talking of further plans. "I've got to stay and take care of my alligator skins," he added. "It means big money to me."

Page 63

"I wish you could come," said the manager. "For we are going into the wilds, and we may need your help."

"Into the wilds?" echoed Mr. Sneed. "Do you think it safe?"

"I don't know whether it is or not," responded Mr. Pertell, and he spoke half seriously. "But we have to go to get the views I want. I hope none of you refuse to come."

No one did, but there was not a little apprehension.

"Those two girls went into the wilds—and did not come back, you know," said Ruth to Alice in a low voice.

"Oh, don't think of it," was the rejoinder. "We are a large party—we can't get lost."

But neither Ruth nor Alice realized what was before them.

CHAPTER XX

LOST

Pushing her bow up sluggish streams—up rivers that flowed under arching trees, heavy with the gray moss, went the *Magnolia*. The party of moving picture players had been on the move for three days now, without a stop for taking of pictures, save those Russ made of the negroes cutting wood for the boilers. No dramas were to be made until they reached a certain wild and uninhabited part of Florida, of which Mr. Pertell had heard, and which he thought would be just right for his purpose.

They had left the vicinity of the alligator hunt, and were pushing on into the interior. In reality it was not so many miles from Sycamore, but it seemed a great way, so lonely was it in the palm forests and cypress swamps.

"Seems to me this is lonely enough to suit anyone," observed Miss Pennington as she sat on deck with the others, and looked up stream.

"It surely is—I feel like screaming just to know that there is something alive around here," added Miss Dixon.

"Go ahead!" laughed Russ. "No one will stop you!"

"Really the silence does seem to get on one's nerves," put in Mr. Towne. "It—er—interferes with—er—thinking, you know."

"Didn't know you ever indulged in that habit!" chaffed Paul.



“Oh, why—er—my deah fellah! Of course I do—at times. I find—I really find I have to give a great deal of consideration—at times—to the suit samples my tailor sends me. And really I shall not be sorry to get back to deah old N’York and renew my wardrobe.”

“If he has any more suits he’ll have to get a man to look after them,” remarked Alice.

“Oh, hush!” chided Ruth.

Then silence once more settled down over the company on the upper deck of the *Magnolia*. An awning protected them from the hot sun, and really it was very pleasant traveling that way. Of course it was lonesome and the solitude was depressing. For days they would see nothing save perhaps the boat of some solitary fisherman, or alligator hunter.

Occasionally they saw some of the big saurians themselves, as they slipped into the water from some log, or sand bar, on the approach of the steamer. Now and then some wild water fowl would dart across the bows of the boat, uttering its harsh cries.

Page 64

Russ got a number of fine nature films, but the real work of making dramas would not take place for another day or two. Meals were served aboard, though once or twice, when a long stop had to be made for the cutting of fuel, a shore party was made up.

Then they would take their luncheon with them, seek out some little palm-shaded glade, and there feast and make merry. Ruth and Alice, with Paul and Russ, always enjoyed these trips.

"I think this will about suit us," said Mr. Pertell, one evening, as the *Magnolia* made a turn in the stream, and came to a place where another sluggish river joined it. "This is the spot spoken of by Jed, and the surrounding country will give us just the scenery we want, I think. We will tie up here for the night, and you and I will make an examination to-morrow, Russ."

"All right, sir. It looks like a good location to me."

It was so warm that supper really was almost a waste of effort on the part of the cook that evening, for few ate much. Then came a comfortable time spent on the deck, while the night wind cooled the day-heated air.

"Oh, isn't this positively stifling!" complained Miss Pennington as she dropped into a chair beside Ruth. "How do you ever stand it? I've bathed my face in cologne, and done everything I can think of to cool off."

"Perhaps if you didn't do so much you would keep cooler," Ruth suggested with a smile. "And really that is a very warm gown you have on."

"I know it, but it's so becoming to me—at least, I flatter myself it is," and she glanced in the direction of Mr. Towne, who as usual was attired "to the limit," as Russ said.

Ruth and Alice, in cool muslins or lawns, were quite in contrast to the rather overdressed former vaudeville actresses.

"I can lend you a kimono," offered Alice.

"No, thank you!" replied Miss Pennington. "I believe in a certain refinement in dress, even if we are in the wilds of Florida."

"I believe in being comfortable," retorted Alice.

Miss Dixon came up on deck, redolent of a highly perfumed talcum powder.

"It seems to keep away the mosquitoes," she murmured in explanation, though no one had said anything, even if Russ did sniff rather ostentatiously.

"I should think it would attract them," chuckled Paul.

"Oh, indeed!" said Miss Dixon, and changed her mind about taking a seat near him.

Returning from a little exploring party next day Russ and Mr. Pertell reported the locality to be just what was wanted.

"We start work to-morrow," said the manager. "And I want everyone to do his or her best, for this will bring our Florida stay to a close."

"And what next?" asked Mr. DeVere.

"I haven't made up my mind yet. But there will be plenty of other pictures to make."

During the next few days every member of the company, from Mr. DeVere to Tommy and Nellie, had their share of work. There were romantic plays filmed, and in these Ruth had good parts. As for Alice she rejoiced when she had humorous "stunts" to do.

Page 65

"You are getting to be a regular 'cut-up'," laughed Paul at the close of one of her performances.

"Yes, and I hope she doesn't get too much that way," said Ruth.

"No danger, sister mine, with you to keep me straight," was the answer, as Alice put an arm around Ruth.

Some comic films were made, and in a few of these Mr. Sneed and Mr. Towne had to do "stunts" such as falling in the mud and water, or toppling down hills head over heels. But Mr. Pertell was careful to warn them not to run dangerous risks.

Mr. DeVere, as usual, did more dignified work, and Mr. Bunn was delighted when told that he might do a bit of Shakespeare. And to do him credit, he acted well, much better than some of his associates had supposed he could.

"I have a new idea for to-day," said Mr. Pertell one morning, as the day's work was about to start. "In one drama I wish to show a little picnic scene, with two girls and their mother. You will be the mother, Mrs. Maguire, and with Ruth and Alice will go off up a side stream in a boat. Russ will go along, of course, to manage the camera, and I think I'll send Paul to help row the boat. Take a gun along, Paul, for you can pretend to shoot some game for the lunch.

"You will also have a regular picnic lunch along—real food, by the way, and you will spread it out in some picturesque spot and eat." Mr. Pertell then went on giving directions for the acting of the drama that was to center around the little picnic.

In due time the boat was loaded with the camera and provisions, and Paul helped in Ruth, Alice and Mrs. Maguire. Then he got in with the gun.

"Better take your raincoats along," advised Mr. DeVere to his daughters, "it looks like a shower and you won't be back before night."

Accordingly the garments were tossed into the boat, and then, leaving the *Magnolia* moored to the bank, the small craft started off up a little side stream that was to be followed for a mile or two.

Russ picked out a likely spot for the picnic scene and after a bit of rehearsal Ruth, Alice, Mrs. Maguire and Paul went through the little play.

"This is more fun than acting," remarked Alice, as she reached for another chicken sandwich.

There was more to do after the meal, and when what food remained had been packed up for a luncheon later in the afternoon, they entered the boat again, and started still farther up stream.

The last film had been made and as the shadows were lengthening the start back was made.

"My, it's getting dark very quickly, and it's only three o'clock," said Paul, as he looked at his watch.

"Going to rain, I guess," said Russ. And rain it did a little later, the drops coming down with tropical violence.

"Oughtn't we to be at the steamer by this time?" asked Mrs. Maguire, when they could hardly see.

"Well, maybe we had," agreed Paul.

Page 66

The light was set aglow, and then the young men shouted and called:

"Magnolia ahoy!"

Echoes were their only answer, save the bellow or grunt of some distant alligator, or the screech of some disturbed wild fowl.

"This is queer," observed Russ. "I'm sure we have rowed back far enough to be at the place where we left the steamer. I wonder—"

But he did not finish.

"What do you wonder?" asked Alice, searchingly.

"Oh—nothing," Russ hesitated.

"Yes, it is something!" she insisted.

"Well, then, I was wondering if we possibly could have come down some wrong creek. There were a number of turns, you know."

"Do—do you mean, we are—lost?" faltered Ruth.

"Well, I'm afraid I do."

CHAPTER XXI

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:

Page 67

"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.

Page 68

"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.”

Page 69

"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.

CHAPTER XXII

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.

Page 70

"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.

Page 71

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.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE PALM HUT

Breakfast, on the shore of the sluggish and swamp-like stream where the big rowboat was moored, was a meagre meal, indeed. For after a moment of consideration it was decided not to use up all the food that remained.

"We may need some for luncheon," explained Russ, who seemed to have taken command of the little party. "We may not be able to reach the steamer by noon."

"Do you think we'll ever be able to reach it, old man?" asked Paul, in a low voice.

"Oh, sure. We've just *got* to find it!" whispered the young operator, with a quick glance at the girls.

"That's so," agreed Paul. But he knew, as well as did Russ, that it would be no easy matter.

And so the "rations" were divided into two parts, though with all there would not have been enough for one substantial meal. Fortunately, however, the coffee was plentiful. The cook, when told to put up a lunch for the picnic party that was to figure in the moving pictures, had been very liberal, otherwise there would have been no food left now. And in the matter of coffee enough had been put in to make several large pots full.

Page 72

As for water, some had been brought along, but, luckily, after this was exhausted Russ managed to find a spring on shore, not far from where the boat was moored.

"We'll have to take a chance on it," he said. "Anyhow, boiling the water for coffee will kill all the germs in it."

"And we can't be too particular," agreed Mrs. Maguire.

The embers of the camp fire kindled in the night were blown into flame, and soon a genial blaze was leaping upward under the big trees. The refugees gathered about it and ate the scanty meal, drinking several cups of coffee.

"That will keep us up, and help to ward off fevers which may lurk in these swamps," said Paul.

The girls had freshened themselves by washing at the side of the brook which flowed from the spring, and then having arranged their hair, with the aid of their side combs, and a pocket mirror Alice carried, they looked, as Paul said, "as sweet as magnolia blossoms."

"Oh, magnolias!" cried Ruth. "If we could only find our *Magnolia*—the steamer!"

"Oh, we'll find her," said Russ, easily—more easily than he felt.

"We look like wrecks beside the girls," declared Paul, as he ran his hand over his unshaven chin.

"Don't you dare desert us to look for a barber!" commanded Ruth. "To be left alone in these woods—ugh!" and she shuddered as she looked about. Certainly it was very lonely.

"It isn't as bad as last night, though," said Alice. "I feel quite at home, now. I wonder what became of that animal you shot, Russ? I'd like to see what it was."

"I wouldn't," declared Ruth, decidedly.

Breakfast over, the blankets and cushions of the boat were spread out in the sun to dry, for they were damp from the rain and dew.

"And now the question is—what are we to do?" asked Mrs. Maguire. "We don't want to spend another night in the woods if we can help it."

"I should say not!" cried Russ. "We'll start off in a little while and make our way back to the steamer."

"Can you find it?" asked Ruth.

"Well, it can't be so very far off," spoke Russ, evasively. "The trouble is there are so many twists and turns to these creeks and rivers that we lost our way. I wish I had thought to bring a compass but, since we didn't, we'll have to go by the sun. I think the steamer lies in that general neighborhood," and he pointed in a south-easterly direction.

"I think so, too," agreed Paul. "And if we row that way I think we'll get back."

Alice, who had gone over to the sunny spot where the blankets and cushions had been put to dry, uttered an exclamation.

"Look!" she cried, and when Paul reached her side she pointed to some bright red spots on the leaves.

"That's blood!" cried the young actor. "Russ, you winged that beast last night, all right."

"Is that so? Let's have a look for him! Maybe I killed him. I'd like to see what sort of a creature it was."

Page 73

The two young men went a little way into the wood, and then came a call:

"Here he is—dead as a door nail."

"Oh, what is it? I want to see it!" cried Alice, who had a good deal of the curious boy in her make-up.

"Don't go!" begged Ruth.

"I shall, too. It can't hurt me—if it's dead."

"I know, dear, but—"

Alice went, however.

"It's a lynx," said Russ, as he looked at the dead beast. "I can tell by those queer little tufts of hair on the ears."

"Are they dangerous?" asked Alice.

"Oh, I guess so, if you had one cornered. They can keep a fellow awake, anyhow, that's one sure thing. I must have fired better than I knew. But then the shot scattered so."

"He must have been pretty close to us," remarked Paul.

"Ugh! I don't like to think of it," murmured Alice, with a little shiver. "Suppose he had jumped into the boat?"

"Don't suppose," laughed Russ.

"Come!" called Mrs. Maguire from where she had remained near the boat with Ruth. "If we're going, we'd better start."

"That's right," agreed Russ. "The sooner we start the quicker we'll get there."

The blankets and cushions were arranged in the craft to make comfortable places for the girls and Mrs. Maguire, and then the remains of the food, and the coffee outfit, having been stowed away, Paul and Russ took the oars, and once more the refugees were under way.

As nearly as possible, allowing for the twists and turns of the stream, the course was in the direction Russ and Paul had agreed upon as being the best. From time to time, as they rowed on, they paused to listen for any hails which would probably be given by the searching party from the steamer.

"For of course daddy will start out after us," said Ruth. "Poor daddy!"

"I guess there's no doubt of that," agreed Russ. "The only trouble is they won't know where to look for us."

"Wouldn't they go first to the place where we took the picnic films?" asked Alice.

"I suppose so, yes; but when we came away from there we left no trail they could follow. So it will be sort of hit or miss with them, as it will be with us."

"We ought to fire the gun once in a while," suggested Mrs. Maguire. "That's what all lost persons do."

"Good idea!" commented Russ. "I should have done it before. And they will probably fire to attract our attention, for there are several guns aboard the steamer."

They now made up a definite program, to the effect that they would stop every half-hour to listen for possible shouts and shots and would also shout and fire in their turn.

This was done, but the sun was nearly noon high, and they had heard no sounds save the natural ones of the swamp and forest.

Now and then they would see alligators in the waters up or down which they rowed, but the saurians showed no disposition to molest the boat. And Russ had too few cartridges to wish to waste any on the creatures.

Page 74

"We may have to spend another night in the open," he confided to Paul.

"It doesn't look very hopeful," agreed the young actor.

Noon came, and as far as could be told from listening, and from looking about, they were as far off as ever from the steamer.

"And yet it may be within a comparatively short distance of us," said Russ, as cheerfully as he could. "Only the woods are so dense that we can't see it, and if our voices and the sounds of the gun carry to the *Magnolia* those aboard can't tell from which direction they come."

They had been keeping on in the course first decided on—southeast—and there were many twists and turns to the trail.

"Would it be any better to get out and walk?" asked Ruth.

"I think not," said Russ. "The boat is really easiest and best for us." He did not say so, but he thought that if they had to spend another night in the open the boat would be absolutely necessary. So they remained aboard.

At noon they tied up, and went ashore to eat the last of the food. Only a little coffee remained, and as the final meagre crumbs were disposed of each one feared to look the others in the face.

What would be next—where would the next meal come from?

No one could answer.

"Well, we'd better move on, I suppose," suggested Russ, after a pause. "No good staying here."

"That's the idea," agreed Paul, trying to speak cheerfully.

He glanced at the two girls. Ruth's lips were quivering, and she seemed on the verge of tears. Alice was bearing up better, but she, too, showed the effects of the strain.

Mrs. Maguire was a pillar of strength and courage.

"Whist! And it's laughin' we'll be at ourselves in a little while—to think we were scared!" she cried, with a forced Irish brogue. "We'll be soon aboard the steamer tellin' what good times we had, an' the others will be wishin' they'd been along."

"I—I wish I could believe so," faltered Ruth.

The boys rowed on, and they were glad of the exertion, for it kept them from brooding over the troubles of their situation, and a troublesome situation it was—they admitted that.

The afternoon was half gone, and in spite of having traveled several miles, twisting this way and that, there were no signs of the steamer.

The boat made a turn in a stream that seemed more sluggish and lonely than any of the others. But it was broader and this gave the boys hope.

“We may get somewhere on this creek,” observed Russ, pulling hard at the oars.

Alice gave a startled cry, pointed toward the shore and said:

“Look!”

They all gazed to where she indicated, and there, on the bank of the stream, was a small hut, made of palm leaves, while in front of it, tied to an overhanging tree, was a large motor boat!

CHAPTER XXIV

Page 75

THE LOST ARE FOUND

"What does it mean?"

"A boat at last!"

"Human beings, anyhow!"

Thus came the excited calls from those in the rowing craft, as it drifted toward the hut on shore—a palm leaf hut that seemed crudely made. Russ and Paul had ceased rowing at the sight of the motor boat, and now their own craft was merely drifting.

"Hurry up, there!" begged Alice. "There must be someone on shore who can put us on the right path. Oh, what a relief!"

"Isn't it!" agreed Ruth, with tears in her eyes. But they were tears of joy, now.

"This came in the nick of time," murmured Russ to Paul. "I was about ready to give up."

"Yes?" agreed Paul, half-questioningly. "And yet isn't it queer we don't see some sign of life?" he asked, in a low voice. "We have made noise enough, but no one has come out of that hut. And the hut itself doesn't seem like a very permanent sort of residence; does it?"

"Indeed it doesn't," spoke Russ. "But it may be one just put up for a night or two by a hunter. Anyhow, we'll soon find out what it means, and if anyone is there who can tell us which way to go."

He and Paul resumed their rowing and a little later were close beside the moored motor boat. It was a large craft, and well appointed, though now it showed signs of being weather-beaten; it was scratched and marred. But it seemed to be in good running order.

"Ahoy there!" called Russ, as he made fast their own boat. "Ahoy in the hut!"

There was no answer.

"Maybe they're asleep," suggested Ruth.

"We can apologize for waking them up," said Alice. "Oh, to think we have help at last!"

Russ and Paul looked at each other. They were not quite so sure, now, in view of the silence, that help was at hand.

Still, the fact that the boat was tied showed that it had not merely drifted to the spot. Some human agency must have been about at some time or other.

With Russ and Paul in the lead the little party made their way to the palm leaf hut. It was ingeniously made—a glance showed that. A palm tree had been taken for the centre pole, and about this had been tied layer after layer of palm leaves, so laid as to shed the rain.

The hut was circular, and at the outer edge of the roof poles had been driven into the ground to support it. There was a small opening, which necessitated stooping to enter, and this doorway, if such it could be called, was covered by a sort of curtain of palm leaves, made in layers and fastened together with withes and wild leaves, laced in and out.

“Quite a piece of work!” commented Paul. “Now I wonder how one is to knock at a palm leaf door?”

“Don’t knock—call,” suggested Russ, and, raising his voice, he fairly shouted:

“Is anyone here?”

There was no answer.

“I wonder if it would be impolite to open the door, or the curtain, and look in?” suggested Alice.

Page 76

"Under the circumstances—I think not," answered Mrs. Maguire. "We need help, and this is the first sign we have seen of it."

Russ stepped forward, and, after a moment of hesitation lifted the curtain of palm leaves. The interior of the hut was rather dark, and, for a moment he could see nothing.

"Anyone there?" asked Paul.

"Not a soul," was the disappointing reply. "It's empty."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Alice.

"What are we to do?" Ruth wanted to know.

No one could answer her. Russ was busy making a more thorough examination of the interior of the hut.

"It's a good place to stay—if we have to," he said to Paul, who had joined him inside.

"And it looks as though we'd have to—eh?"

"I'm afraid so."

Russ fastened the palm curtain back and this let in more light. Then the others came up, though there was not room for them all inside. The hut would hold three comfortably—no more.

"Who has been here?"

"What sort of a hut is it?"

"Has anyone been here lately?"

Ruth, Alice, and Mrs. Maguire, in turn, asked these questions.

"I don't know who has been here," said Russ, "but it's the sort of a hut a native might build—possibly a Seminole Indian. Or some hunters may have it to stay a few nights in a spot where they could get alligators, or whatever game they were after. The fact that the boat is here seems to show they haven't gone for good."

"Oh, then they may come back!" cried Ruth.

"Very likely to, I should say," spoke Russ. "We'll just stick around until they do."

"I hope they come back before dark," ventured Ruth, and her sister echoed the wish.



A closer examination of the hut showed two rude bunks, made of sticks, raised slightly above the surface of the ground. The bunks were covered with thick layers of Spanish moss, and were evidently far from being uncomfortable. A few blankets showed that the occupants did not lack for a little comfort.

There were a few cooking utensils scattered about, and outside, the ashes of a camp fire, made between stones—a sort of oven—showed how the meals were prepared. But there was little evidence of food, save a few empty tins.

“There are evidently two persons staying here,” observed Russ, as he looked at a packing box, which served as a table, and noted two tin plates, and two knives, forks and spoons. “It must be real jolly, camping this way.”

“I’d rather have a tent,” said Paul. “This palm leaf hut looks artistic, and all that, but not very secure.”

“It’s secure enough in good weather,” declared Russ. “Well, I guess the only thing to do is to wait until these folks come back. They won’t remain away all night, I hardly think.”

“But if they don’t come back until dark, what shall we do?” asked Ruth. “We can’t stay out all night again.”

Page 77

"We may have to," declared practical Alice.

"That is so, and we may as well face the issue," said Russ, somewhat gravely. "And now that we have found a sign of human beings, who can possibly tell us which way to go to find the steamer, it would be foolish to waste this chance. If we go off by ourselves again we may get farther and farther away from the *Magnolia*."

"That is so," agreed Paul. "I think we had better stay."

"That's what I say!" exclaimed Mrs. Maguire. "It seems like company just to look at that boat and the hut, and to know that someone has been here lately, and will come back."

"Oh, they'll be sure to come back," Russ said. "That's is too good a boat to abandon. Why, it must be worth a thousand dollars."

He and Paul went down to examine it, while the moving picture girls and Mrs. Maguire looked about the hut.

"It seems almost like home, after what we have been through," remarked Ruth.

"I wish there was something to eat here," said Alice, after a stroll about the vicinity of the hut. "Whoever lives here must get their supplies in from day to day, and eat them all up."

"Or they may be out after supplies now," added Mrs. Maguire.

The shadows were lengthening, but the sun was still bright, and it would not be night for several hours. There was a period of anxious waiting.

"I wonder if we hadn't better shout again, and fire a few shots?" remarked Paul. "We may be near our own steamer now, though it doesn't seem so. We might be in another country, for all we can tell."

"I believe we will give a few signals," agreed Russ. "And I can spare a couple of cartridges. I only wish I could see something worth eating to shoot at. Then I could be killing two birds with one stone—giving a signal and providing a meal."

But there seemed no suitable mark for the weapon to be aimed at, and, after they had united their voices in a chorus of calls, Russ fired twice—at intervals.

Then came a period of anxious waiting and silence.

"Call once more," suggested Ruth.

“Hark!” exclaimed Alice, raising her hand to add to her injunction, for Russ had been about to speak. “I heard something.”

They all listened intently.

“There it is again!” whispered Alice.

Unmistakably now they all heard voices calling—voices that increased in intensity—coming nearer.

“Oh, they’ve found us! They’ve found us!” half sobbed Ruth.

“Call again, boys—I—I can’t,” faltered Alice.

Russ and Paul shouted.

Again came an unmistakable answer. Now was heard a crashing in the underbrush that told of the approach of someone, and, a moment later there came into view, on the far side of the clearing, where stood the palm leaf hut, two girls, one with a gun over her shoulder, and the other with a brace of birds hanging from her waist.

Page 78

The two girls stopped for a moment, and then, with joyful shouts, rushed forward.

As for our friends, they seemed paralyzed with astonishment. It was so different from what they had expected. Then Alice found her voice, and cried:

“The two lost girls—we have found them!”

CHAPTER XXV

OUT OF THE WILDS

For perhaps several seconds the two parties strangely met in that Florida wild stood staring at one another. Then the two girls hurried forward, and one of them exclaimed:

“Oh, have you come for us?”

“Not exactly, Miss Madison.”

“Oh—you—you know us?” gasped the other.

“Certainly, Mabel,” laughed Alice. “Don’t you remember us—the moving picture girls?”

“Ruth—Alice DeVere!” came the simultaneous cry from the lost girls—now the *found* girls. “Oh, how did you ever get here?” asked Helen Madison, for it was really she and her sister. Alice had recognized them first, and Ruth knew them a moment later.

“We are lost, like yourselves,” said Ruth. “Oh, but can you tell us where our steamer is?”

“Your steamer—no!” half-sobbed Mabel. “Oh, it is awful! We have been lost a long time—it seems a month, but of course it isn’t. We can’t find our way out of this wilderness. It is a labyrinth, and we dare not go far from this hut for fear we shall never find it again. It has been terrible. But if you are lost you cannot help us. What shall we do?”

“Let us eat first,” suggested Russ, practically. “You have some birds there. I fancy you are as hungry as we are. We have some crackers and coffee. We’ll get up a meal and then decide what to do. Come, Paul, we’re the commissary department.”

“Oh, but we must hear your story!” cried Ruth to the lost girls, after she had presented Mrs. Maguire and the boys. “We read about you in the paper, and we heard of you from the hotel clerk in Sycamore.”

“There isn’t much to tell,” said Mabel. “We started off after wild orchids. Well, we became lost, and in trying to find our way back we wandered farther and farther into the

swamp. We had our motor boat, as you see, and quite a quantity of provisions, which was lucky for us. We tried our best to get out, but could not.

“Finally we found this spot—the hut was already here, built by alligator hunters, very likely. We appropriated it, and the small quantity of food it contained. Since then we have lived on that and what we could shoot. Fortunately game was plentiful, but we have so longed for some bread and coffee. I am dying for a cup.”

“Dinner will soon be served,” laughed Russ, who, with Paul, was preparing a rude meal, broiling the birds over a camp fire.

“And now tell us about yourselves,” suggested Mabel to Alice. “Oh! to think of meeting you again this way,” and she recalled the first meeting in the train going to the New England backwoods.

Page 79

By degrees, and with each one telling a part, the story of the moving picture players was related. They told how they had looked in vain for their steamer. Mabel and Helen Madison also went more into details, giving some of their trying experiences in the swamps and bayous.

"But for days we have not tried to find our way from here," said Mabel. "Our motor boat broke down, and we can't get it to go."

"I fancy I can fix it," said Russ, "but the question is: Which way to go? We may only get to a worse place."

"Let us eat, anyhow," suggested Paul.

It was not a very elaborate meal, but it put new heart and courage into the lost ones.

"We'll get back somehow—some time," declared Alice, who was now almost her old self. "And then won't everybody be glad!"

Night was coming on, but before the advent of darkness Russ had remedied the defect in the motor boat. There was trouble with the ignition system, and also with the carbureter.

"Now we could go, if we knew which way to go," he said, as he tested the craft.

"Hark!" exclaimed Alice, suddenly.

The sound of a cheerful whistle came through the screen of trees.

"Oh!" gasped Ruth. "Who can it be?"

She had her answer a moment later.

Around a bend in the stream, rowing a battered boat, came an old colored man. It was he who was making the melody. Cheerfully he whistled, and more happily was he listened to.

"Ahoy there, Uncle!" called Russ. "Can you tell us where we are, and where the *Magnolia* is tied up?"

The old colored man was so startled by the sudden hail, breaking in on his whistling, that he nearly went overboard. He recovered himself, however, and called out:

"Whut—whut yo' all doin' at mah cabin?"

"Is this your place, Uncle?" asked Russ.

"It shore am. An'—an'—I bids yo' all welcome—I shore does, honey!" he added quickly, remembering his hospitality.

"We've made ourselves at home," said Mabel. "Oh, whoever you are, can you show us the way out of this wilderness?"

"Kin I show yo' all a way outen dish yeah woods? I shore kin, honey lamb! I knows dish yeah place laik a book, even if I cain't read. Where all does yo' all want t' go? Oh, wait a minute, though. Hole on! I done got t' ax yo' all some questions. Hab yo' all seen any photographers round 'bout yeah?"

"Photographers?" repeated Paul.

"Yais, sah! I done passed a steamer yist'day, an' dey all on board was monstrous peeved 'cause dey done lost der photographer. Yo' all know—he takes dese pictures dat twinkle laik stars—yo' know, slidin' pictures, I guess dey calls 'em."

"Do you mean moving pictures?" asked Russ, eagerly.

"Uh, huh! Dat's what I means, honey. All on board dish yeah steamer was pow'ful worried case de moving picture man an' some oders got lost. Yo' all didn't see 'em; did yo' all?"

Page 80

"We're them!" cried Alice, with a justifiable disregard of grammar.

"And can you take us to that steamer?" asked Ruth, eagerly.

"I shore can, honey lamb; but it's quite a far way t' row t'night."

"We can go in the motor boat!" cried Mabel. "Oh, how glad I am that we have it. There's gasoline enough, I think, and there is a powerful searchlight. Oh, Helen, we're found—we're found!" and she fell to sobbing on her sister's shoulder.

Ruth and Alice, too, clasped their arms about each other. All their troubles seemed over now.

"Do you think you can pilot us to that steamer?" asked Russ.

"I shore can, honey lamb!" chuckled the old negro. "I'se libbed in dese waters boy an' man all mah life. Yo' can't lose me!"

"And is this your place?" asked Mrs. Maguire, pointing to the palm hut.

"Dat's what it am, honey lamb. Uh, huh! I comes heah t' hunt alligators an' sea cows. Sometimes I stays fer a week at a time. I jest come up now t' see if dere any traces of 'gators. I'se gwine t' start in huntin' next week."

"Oh, isn't he a dear!" laughed Alice, with tears of joy in her eyes.

"Well, I guess you can postpone your investigation for a while," suggested Russ. "It's getting dark, Uncle, and we'd like to get back to the steamer. Now, if you'll pilot us we'll pay you well, and see that you get back in the morning. You can stay on the *Magnolia* to-night—if we find her."

"Oh, I'll find her, all right—don't yo' all let dat fret yo'!" chuckled the negro. "I knows jest where's she tied. It's a few miles from heah, but in dat choo-choo boat yo' all kin soon be dere."

Leaving his own boat on shore the colored man got into the motor boat with the others. The rowboat from the steamer was towed, and in it were left the rugs, blankets, moving picture camera and other things.

The two Madison sisters brought away with them a box of rare orchid specimens, the results of their search.

"I wish I could get a moving picture of this; but I can't," sighed Russ, as the motor boat started off in the twilight. Soon it became so dark that the searchlight was set aglow, and this gave a fine illumination.

But Uncle Joshua, which the negro said was his only name, seemed to need no light. In and out among the creeks, rivers, and bayous he directed Russ to steer, until finally, making a turn in a stream, there burst out on the eager eyes of the refugees the lights of the steamer.

"Magnolia ahoy!"

"Here we are!"

"Oh, Daddy, Daddy!"

"On board the *Magnolia*!"

Such joyful shouts as there were, and such joyful answers!

And then—but I leave you to imagine the scene aboard the steamer when the lost ones stepped out of the motor launch. Mr. DeVere, who was in a state of collapse through fear for his daughters, nearly fainted from joy, but he soon was himself again. And as for Tommy and Nellie, it is a wonder their grandmother was able to stand all the hugging and kissing they gave her.

Page 81

As for the other members of the picture company, they rejoiced to the extent of tears, and even Mr. Sneed whistled cheerfully.

Mabel and Helen Madison were really in need of food and rest, for they had fared worse than our friends, having been lost so long, and suffering so from exposure. They were put to bed, and ordered to rest, the assurance being given that early in the morning the start would be made for their home in Sycamore.

And then such a talking time as there was! It was almost morning before anyone thought of bed.

"And all the while we were only a comparatively short distance from here," said Russ, when everything had been explained. But the dense woods and the winding waterways were as effective a barrier as many miles would have been.

"It's lucky Uncle Joshua came along," commented Alice, and there was no dissent from this.

"I declare, we seem to be getting into more and more strenuous adventures, the more moving picture business we do," said Ruth. "But I think this is about the end."

"Indeed it isn't!" declared Mr. Pertell. "I don't want to crowd you too much, but I have an idea for some new moving pictures, and I'd like to keep this whole company together."

"Where this time?" Alice asked.

"Out West," was the answer. "I am planning a big drama, to be called 'East and West,' and I think it will be our best effort."

"Out West," said Ruth, softly. "I wonder what will happen to us out there?"

And the answer may be found by reading the next book of this series, to be entitled "The Moving Picture Girls at Rocky Ranch; Or, Great Days Among the Cowboys."

The day following the finding of the lost girls the *Magnolia* started back for Sycamore. It was reached without accident, or incident of moment, and how the whole town rejoiced when it was known that the two Madison girls were aboard the boat! There was a veritable holiday.

The moving picture girls, too, came in for their share of attention, and had Uncle Joshua been there he probably would have been one of the centres of attraction. But, after being suitably rewarded, he went back to his palm hut, which had served the lost girls so well.

Russ made a few more films, to complete the set wanted, and then came a packing-up for the return to New York. Before that, however, Mr. Madison insisted on being the host to the entire company at a garden fete in honor of his daughters' safe return.

"Oh, but it was lovely under the palms, even if we did get lost," said Alice, as they started on their northward journey.

"Indeed it was," agreed Ruth. "I wonder if we will like the West as well."

"Better!" predicted Russ.

"I'm going to be a cowboy!" declared Paul.

And now we will take leave of the Moving Picture Girls and their friends.

THE END