

Aunt Jane's Nieces Out West

By

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(AKA Edith Van Dyne)

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CHAPTER I - CAUGHT BY THE CAMERA

"This is getting to be an amazing old world," said a young girl, still in her "teens," as she musingly leaned her chin on her hand.

"It has always been an amazing old world, Beth," said another girl who was sitting on the porch railing and swinging her feet in the air.

"True, Patsy," was the reply; "but the people are doing such peculiar things nowadays."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed a little man who occupied a reclining chair within hearing distance; "that is the way with you young folks--always confounding the world with its people."

"Don't the people make the world, Uncle John?" asked Patricia Doyle, looking at him quizzically.

"No, indeed; the world could get along very well without its people; but the people--"

"To be sure; they need the world," laughed Patsy, her blue eyes twinkling so that they glorified her plain, freckled face.

"Nevertheless," said Beth de Graf, soberly, "I think the people have struck a rapid pace these days and are growing bold and impudent. The law appears to allow them too much liberty. After our experience of this morning I shall not be surprised at anything that happens--especially in this cranky state of California."

"To what experience do you allude, Beth?" asked Uncle John, sitting up straight and glancing from one to another of his two nieces. He was a genial looking, round-faced man, quite bald and inclined to be a trifle stout; yet his fifty-odd years sat lightly upon him.

"Why, we had quite an adventure this morning," said Patsy, laughing again at the recollection, and answering her uncle because Beth hesitated to. "For my part, I think it was fun, and harmless fun, at that; but Beth was scared out of a year's growth. I admit feeling a little creepy at the time, myself; but it was all a joke and really we ought not to mind it at all."

"Tell me all about it, my dear!" said Mr. Merrick, earnestly, for whatever affected his beloved nieces was of prime importance to him.

"We were taking our morning stroll along the streets," began Patsy, "when on turning a corner we came upon a crowd of people who seemed to be greatly excited. Most of them were workmen in flannel shirts, their sleeves rolled up, their hands grimy with toil. These stood before a brick building that seemed like a factory, while from its doors other crowds of workmen and some shopgirls were rushing into the street and several policemen were shaking their clubs and running here and there in a sort of panic. At first Beth and I stopped and hesitated to go on, but as the sidewalk seemed open and fairly free I pulled Beth along, thinking we might discover what the row was about. Just as we got opposite the building a big workman rushed at us and shouted: 'Go back--go back! The wall is falling.'

"Well, Uncle, you can imagine our dismay. We both screamed, for we thought our time had come, for sure. My legs were so weak that Beth had to drag me away and her face was white as a sheet and full of terror. Somehow we managed to stagger into the street, where a dozen men caught us and hurried us away. I hardly thought we were in a safe place when the big workman cried: 'There, young ladies; that will do. Your expression was simply immense and if this doesn't turn out to be the best film of the year, I'll miss my guess! Your terror-stricken features will make a regular hit, for the terror wasn't assumed, you know. Thank you very much for happening along just then.'"

Patsy stopped her recital to laugh once more, with genuine merriment, but her cousin Beth seemed annoyed and Uncle John was frankly bewildered.

"But--what--what--was it all about?" he inquired.

"Why, they were taking a moving picture, that was all, and the workmen and shopgirls and policemen were all actors. There must have been a hundred of them, all told, and when we recovered from our scare I could hear the machine beside me clicking away as it took the picture."

"Did the wall fall?" asked Uncle John.

"Not just then. They first got the picture of the rush-out and the panic, and then they stopped the camera and moved the people to a safe distance away. We watched them set up some dummy figures of girls and workmen, closer in, and then in some way they toppled over the big brick wall. It fell into the street with a thundering crash, but only the dummies were buried under the debris."

Mr. Merrick drew a long breath.

"It's wonderful!" he exclaimed. "Why, it must have cost a lot of money to ruin such a building--and all for the sake of a picture!"

"That's what I said to the manager," replied Patsy; "but he told us the building was going to be pulled down, anyhow, and a better one built in its place; so he invented a picture story to fit the falling walls and it didn't cost him so much as one might think. So you see, Uncle, we are in that picture--big as life and scared stiff--and I'd give a lot to see how we look when we're positively terror-stricken."

"It will cost you just ten cents," remarked Beth, with a shrug; "that is, if the picture proves good enough to be displayed at one of those horrid little theatres."

"One?" said Uncle John. "One thousand little theatres, most likely, will show the picture, and perhaps millions of spectators will see you and Patsy running from the falling wall."

"Dear me!" wailed Patsy. "That's more fame than I bargained for. Do millions go to see motion pictures, Uncle?"

"I believe so. The making of these pictures is getting to be an enormous industry. I was introduced to Otis Werner, the other day, and he told me a good deal about it. Werner is with one of the big concerns here--the Continental, I think--and he's a very nice and gentlemanly fellow. I'll introduce you to him, some time, and he'll tell you all the wonders of the motion picture business."

"I haven't witnessed one of those atrocious exhibitions for months," announced Beth; "nor have I any desire to see one again."

"Not our own special picture?" asked Patsy reproachfully.

"They had no right to force us into their dreadful drama," protested Beth. "Motion pictures are dreadfully tiresome things--comedies and tragedies alike. They are wild and weird in conception, quite unreal and wholly impossible. Of course the scenic pictures, and those recording historical events, are well enough in their way, but I cannot understand how so many cheap little picture theatres thrive."

"They are the poor people's solace and recreation," declared Mr. Merrick. "The picture theatre has become the laboring man's favorite resort. It costs him but five or ten cents and it's the sort of show he can appreciate. I'm told the motion picture is considered the saloon's worst enemy, for many a man is taking his wife and children to a picture theatre evenings instead of joining a gang of his fellows before the bar, as he formerly did."

"That is the best argument in their favor I have ever heard," admitted Beth, who was strong on temperance; "but I hope, Uncle, you are not defending the insolent methods of those picture-makers."

"Not at all, my dear. I consider the trapping of innocent bystanders to be--eh--er--highly reprehensible, and perhaps worse. If I can discover what picture manager was guilty of the act, I shall--shall--"

"What, Uncle?"

"I shall hint that he owes you an apology," he concluded, rather lamely.

Beth smiled scornfully.

"Meantime," said she, "two very respectable girls, who are not actresses, will be exhibited before the critical eyes of millions of stupid workmen, reformed drunkards, sad-faced women and wiggling children--not in dignified attitudes, mind you, but scurrying from what they supposed was an imminent danger."

"I hope it will do the poor things good to see us," retorted Patsy. "To be strictly honest, Beth, we were not trapped at all; we were the victims of circumstances. When I remember how quick-witted and alert that manager was, to catch us unawares and so add to the value of his picture, I can quite forgive the fellow his audacity."

"It wasn't audacity so much as downright impudence!" persisted Beth.

"I quite agree with you," said Mr. Merrick. "Do you wish me to buy that film and prevent the picture's being shown?"

"Oh, no!" cried Patsy in protest. "I'm dying to see how we look. I wouldn't have that picture sidetracked for anything."

"And you, Beth?"

"Really, Uncle John, the thing is not worth worrying over," replied his niece. "I am naturally indignant at being drawn into such a thing against my will, but I doubt if anyone who knows us, or whose opinion we value, will ever visit a moving picture theatre or see this film. The common people will not recognize us, of course."

You must not think Beth de Graf was snobbish or aristocratic because of this speech, which her cousin Patsy promptly denounced as "snippy." Beth was really a lovable and sunny-tempered girl, very democratic in her tastes in spite of the fact that she was the possessor of an unusual fortune. She was out of sorts to-day, resentful of the fright she had endured that morning and in the mood to say harsh things.

Even Patricia Doyle had been indignant, at first; but Patsy's judgment was clearer than her cousin's and her nature more responsive. She quickly saw the humorous side of their adventure and could enjoy the recollection of her momentary fear.

These two girls were spending the winter months in the glorious climate of Southern California, chaperoned by their uncle and guardian, John Merrick.

They had recently established themselves at a cosy hotel in Hollywood, which is a typical California village, yet a suburb of the great city of Los Angeles. A third niece, older and now married--Louise Merrick Weldon--lived on a ranch between Los Angeles and San Diego, which was one reason why Uncle John and his wards had located in this pleasant neighborhood.

To observe this trio--the simple, complacent little man and his two young nieces--no stranger would suspect them to be other than ordinary tourists, bent on escaping the severe Eastern winter; but in New York the name of John Merrick was spoken with awe in financial circles, where his many millions made him an important figure. He had practically retired from active business and his large investments were managed by his brother-in-law, Major Gregory Doyle, who was Miss Patsy's father and sole surviving parent. All of Mr. Merrick's present interest in life centered in his three nieces, and because Louise was happily married and had now an establishment of her own--including a rather new but very remarkable baby--Uncle John was drawn closer to the two younger nieces and devoted himself wholly to their welfare.

The girls had not been rich when their fairy godfather first found them. Indeed, each of them had been energetically earning, or preparing to earn, a livelihood. Now, when their uncle's generosity had made them wealthy, they almost regretted those former busy days of poverty, being obliged to discover new interests in life in order to keep themselves occupied and contented. All three were open-handed and open-hearted, sympathetic to the unfortunate and eager to assist those who needed money, as many a poor girl and worthy young fellow could testify. In all their charities they were strongly supported by Mr. Merrick, whose enormous income permitted him to indulge in many benevolences. None gave ostentatiously, for they were simple, kindly folk who gave for the pure joy of giving and begrudged all knowledge of their acts to anyone outside their own little circle.

There is no doubt that John Merrick was eccentric. It is generally conceded that a rich man may indulge in eccentricities, provided he maintains a useful position in society, and Mr. Merrick's peculiarities only served to render him the more interesting to those who knew him best. He did astonishing things in a most matter-of-fact way and acted more on impulse than on calm reflection; so it is not to be wondered at that the queer little man's nieces had imbibed some of his queerness. Being by nature lively and aggressive young women, whose eager interest in life would not permit them to be idle, they encountered many interesting experiences.

They had just come from a long visit to Louise at the ranch and after conferring gravely together had decided to hide themselves in Hollywood, where they might spend a quiet and happy winter in wandering over the hills, in boating or bathing

in the ocean or motoring over the hundreds of miles of splendid boulevards of this section.

Singularly enough, their choice of a retreat was also the choice of a score or more of motion picture makers, who had discovered Hollywood before them and were utilizing the brilliant sunshine and clear atmosphere in the production of their films, which were supplied to picture theatres throughout the United States and Europe. Appreciating the value of such a monster industry, the authorities permitted the cameras to be set up on the public streets or wherever there was an appropriate scene to serve for a background to the photo-plays. It was no unusual sight to see troops of cowboys and Indians racing through the pretty village or to find the cameraman busy before the imposing residence of a millionaire or the vine-covered bungalow of a more modest citizen. No one seemed to resent such action, for Californians admire the motion picture as enthusiastically as do the inhabitants of the Eastern states, so the girls' "adventure" was really a common incident.

CHAPTER II - AN OBJECT LESSON

It was the following afternoon when Uncle John captured his casual acquaintance, Mr. Otis Werner, in the office of the hotel and dragged the motion picture man away to his rooms to be introduced to his nieces.

"Here, my dears, is Mr. Werner," he began, as he threw open the door of their apartment and escorted his companion in. "He is one of those picture makers, you'll remember, and--and--"

He paused abruptly, for Beth was staring at Mr. Werner with a frown on her usually placid features, while Patsy was giggling hysterically. Mr. Werner, a twinkle of amusement in his eye, bowed with exaggerated deference.

"Dear me!" said Uncle John. "Is--is anything wrong!"

"No; it's all right, Uncle," declared Patsy, striving to control a fresh convulsion of laughter. "Only--this is the same dreadful manager who dragged us into his picture yesterday."

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Werner; "I'm not a manager; I'm merely what is called in our profession a 'producer,' or a 'stage director.'"

"Well, you're the man, anyhow," asserted Patsy. "So what have you to say for yourself, sir?"

"If you were annoyed, I humbly apologize," he returned. "Perhaps I was unintentionally rude to frighten you in that way, but my excuse lies in our subservience to the demands of our art. We seldom hesitate at anything which tends to give our pictures the semblance of reality."

"Art, did you say, Mr. Werner?" It was Beth who asked this and there was a bit of a sneer in her tone.

"It is really art--art of the highest character," he replied warmly. "Do you question it, Miss--Miss--"

"Miss de Graf. I suppose, to be fair, I must admit that the photography is art; but the subjects of your pictures, I have observed, are far from artistic. Such a picture, for instance, as you made yesterday can have little value to anyone."

"Little value! Why, Miss de Graf, you astonish me," he exclaimed. "I consider that picture of the falling wall one of my greatest triumphs--and I've been making pictures for years. Aside from its realism, its emotional nature--'thrills,' we call it--"

-this picture conveys a vivid lesson that ought to prove of great benefit to humanity."

Beth was looking at him curiously now. Patsy was serious and very attentive. As Uncle John asked his visitor to be seated his voice betrayed the interest he felt in the conversation.

"Of course we saw only a bit of the picture," said Patsy Doyle. "What was it all about, Mr. Werner?"

"We try," said he, slowly and impressively, as if in love with his theme, "to give to our pictures an educational value, as well as to render them entertaining. Some of them contain a high moral lesson; others, a warning; many, an incentive to live purer and nobler lives. All of our plots are conceived with far more thought than you may suppose. Underlying many of our romances and tragedies are moral injunctions which are involuntarily absorbed by the observers, yet of so subtle a nature that they are not suspected. We cannot preach except by suggestion, for people go to our picture shows to be amused. If we hurled righteousness at them they would soon desert us, and we would be obliged to close up shop."

"I must confess that this is, to me, a most novel presentation of the subject," said Beth, more graciously. "Personally, I care little for your pictures; but I can understand how travel scenes and scientific or educational subjects might be of real benefit to the people."

"I can't understand anyone's being indifferent to the charm of motion pictures," he responded, somewhat reproachfully.

"Why, at first they struck me as wonderful," said the girl. "They were such a novel invention that I went to see them from pure curiosity. But, afterward, the subjects presented in the pictures bored me. The drama pictures were cheap and common, the comedy scenes worse; so I kept away from the picture theatres."

"Educational pictures," said Mr. Werner, musingly, "have proved a failure, as I hinted, except when liberally interspersed with scenes of action and human interest. The only financial failures among the host of motion picture theatres, so far as I have observed, are those that have attempted to run travel scenes and educational films exclusively. There are so few people with your--eh--culture and--and--elevated tastes, you see, when compared with the masses."

"But tell us about our picture," pleaded Patsy. "What lesson can that falling wall possibly convey?"

"I'll be glad to explain that," he eagerly replied, "for I am quite proud of it, I assure you. There are many buildings throughout our larger cities that were erected as cheaply as possible and without a single thought for the safety of their tenants.

So many disasters have resulted from this that of late years building inspectors have been appointed in every locality to insist on proper materials and mechanical efficiency in the erection of all classes of buildings. These inspectors, however, cannot tear the old buildings down to see if they are safe, and paint and plaster cover a multitude of sins of unscrupulous builders. Usually the landlord or owner knows well the condition of his property and in many cases refuses to put it into such shape as to insure the safety of his tenants. Greed, false economy and heartless indifference to the welfare of others are unfortunately too prevalent among the wealthy class. No ordinary argument could induce owners to expend money in strengthening or rebuilding their income-producing properties. But I get after them in my picture with a prod that ought to rouse them to action.

"The picture opens with a scene in the interior of a factory. Men, girls and boys are employed. The foreman observes a warning crack in the wall and calls the proprietor's attention to it. In this case the manufacturer is the owner of the building, but he refuses to make repairs. His argument is that the wall has stood for many years and so is likely to stand for many more; it would be a waste of money to repair the old shell. Next day the foreman shows him that the crack has spread and extended along the wall in an alarming manner but still the owner will not act. The workmen counsel together seriously. They dare not desert their jobs, for they must have money to live. They send a petition to the owner, who becomes angry and swears he won't be driven to a useless expense by his own employees. In the next scene the manufacturer's daughter--his only child--having heard that the building was unsafe, comes to her father's office to plead with him to change his mind and make the needed repairs. Although he loves this daughter next to his money he resents her interference in a business matter, and refuses. Her words, however, impress him so strongly that he calls her back from the door to kiss her and say that he will give the matter further thought, for her sake.

"As she leaves the office there is a cry of terror from the factory and the working people come rushing out of the now tottering building. That was when you two young ladies came walking up the street and were dragged out of danger by the foreman of the shop--in other words, by myself. The owner's daughter, bewildered by the confusion, hesitates what to do or which way to turn, and as she stands upon the sidewalk she is crushed by the falling wall, together with several of her father's employees."

"How dreadful!" exclaimed Patsy.

"Of course no one was actually hurt," he hastened to say; "for we used dummy figures for the wall to fall upon. In the final scene the bereaved father suddenly realizes that he has been working and accumulating only for this beloved child--the child whose life he has sacrificed by his miserly refusal to protect his

workmen. His grief is so intense that no one who follows the story of this picture will ever hesitate to repair a building promptly, if he learns it is unsafe. Do you now understand the lesson taught, young ladies?"

Mr. Werner's dramatic recital had strongly impressed the two girls, while Uncle John was visibly affected.

"I'm very glad," said the little man fervently, "that none of my money is in factories or other buildings that might prove unsafe. It would make my life miserable if I thought I was in any way responsible for such a catastrophe as you have pictured."

"It seems to me," observed Patsy, "that your story is unnecessarily cruel, Mr. Werner."

"Then you do not understand human nature," he retorted; "or, at least, that phase of human nature I have aimed at. Those indifferent rich men are very hard to move and you must figuratively hit them squarely between the eyes to make them even wink."

They were silent for a time, considering this novel aspect of the picture business. Then Beth asked:

"Can you tell us, sir, when and where we shall be able to see this picture?"

"It will be released next Monday."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that we, as manufacturers, supply certain agencies in all the large cities, who in turn rent our films to the many picture theatres. When a picture is ready, we send copies to all our agencies and set a day when they may release it, or give it to their customers to use. In this way the picture will be shown in all parts of the United States on the same day--in this case, next Monday."

"Isn't that very quick?"

"Yes. The picture we took yesterday will to-night be shipped, all complete and ready to run, to forty-four different centers."

"And will any picture theatre in Hollywood or Los Angeles show it?"

"Certainly. It will be at the Globe Theatre in Los Angeles and at the Isis Theatre in Hollywood, for the entire week."

"We shall certainly see it," announced Uncle John.

When Mr. Werner had gone they conversed for some time on the subject of motion pictures, and the man's remarkable statement concerning them.

"I had no idea," Beth confessed, "that the industry of making pictures is so extensive and involves so much thought and detail."

"And money," added Uncle John. "It must be a great expense just to employ that army of actors."

"I suppose Mr. Werner, being a theatrical man, has drawn the long bow in his effort to impress us," said Patsy. "I've been thinking over some of the pictures I've seen recently and I can't imagine a moral, however intangible or illusive, in connection with any of them. But perhaps I wasn't observant enough. The next time I go to a picture show I shall study the plays more carefully."

CHAPTER III - AN ATTRACTIVE GIRL

On Saturday they were treated to a genuine surprise, for when the omnibus drew up before the hotel entrance it brought Arthur Weldon and his girl-wife, Louise, who was Uncle John's eldest niece. It also brought "the Cherub," a wee dimpled baby hugged closely in the arms of Inez, its Mexican nurse.

Patsy and Beth shrieked in ecstasy as they rushed forward to smother "Toodlums," as they irreverently called the Cherub, with kisses. Inez, a handsome, dark-eyed girl, relinquished her burden cheerfully to the two adoring "aunties," while Uncle John kissed Louise and warmly shook the hand of her youthful husband.

"What in the world induced you to abandon your beloved ranch?" inquired Mr. Merrick.

"Don't ask me, sir!" replied Arthur, laughing at the elder gentleman's astonishment. He was a trim young fellow, with a clean-cut, manly face and frank, winning manners.

"It's sort of between hay and grass with us, you know," he explained. "Walnuts all marketed and oranges not ready for the pickers. All our neighbors have migrated, this way or that, for their regular winter vacations, and after you all left, Louise and I began to feel lonely. So at breakfast this morning we decided to flit. At ten o'clock we caught the express, and here we are--in time for lunch. I hope it's ready, Uncle John."

It was; but they must get their rooms and settle the baby in her new quarters before venturing to enter the dining room. So they were late for the midday meal and found themselves almost the only guests in the great dining hall.

As they sat at table, chatting merrily together, Arthur asked:

"What are you staring at, Patsy?"

"A lovely girl," said she. "One of the loveliest girls I have ever seen. Don't look around, Arthur; it might attract their attention."

"How many girls are there?"

"Two; and a lady who seems to be their mother. The other girl is pretty, too, but much younger than her sister--or friend, for they do not resemble one another much. They came in a few minutes ago and are seated at the table in the opposite corner."

"New arrivals, I suppose," remarked Uncle John, who from his position could observe the group.

"No," said Patsy; "their waitress seems to know them well. But I've never before seen them in the hotel."

"We are always early at meal time," explained Beth, "and to-day these people are certainly late. But they are pretty girls, Patsy. For once I concur in your judgment."

"You arouse my curiosity," said Arthur, speaking quietly, so as not to be overheard in the far corner. "If I hear more ecstatic praises of these girls I shall turn around and stare them out of countenance."

"Don't," said Louise. "I'm glad your back is toward them, Arthur, for it preserves you from the temptation to flirt."

"Oh, as for that, I do not need to turn around in order to see pretty girls," he replied.

"Thank you, Arthur," said Patsy, making a face at him. "Look me over all you like, and flirt if you want to. I'm sure Louise won't object."

"Really, Patsy, you're not bad to look at," he retorted, eyeing her critically. "Aside from your red hair, the pug nose and the freckles, you have many excellent qualities. If you didn't squint--"

"Squint!"

"What do you call that affection of your eyes?"

"That," she said, calmly eating her dessert, "was a glance of scorn--burning, bitter scorn!"

"I maintain it was a squint," declared Arthur.

"That isn't her only expression," announced Uncle John, who loved these little exchanges of good-humored banter. "On Monday I will show you Patsy as a terror-stricken damsel in distress."

"Also Beth, still more distressful," added Patsy; and then they told Louise and Arthur about the picture.

"Fine!" he cried. "I'm deeply gratified that my own relatives--"

"By marriage."

"I am gratified that my secondhand cousins have been so highly honored. I'd rather see a good moving picture than the best play ever produced."

"You'll see a good one this time," asserted Patsy, "for we are the stars."

"I think that unscrupulous Mr. Werner deserves a reprimand," said Louise.

"Oh, he apologized," explained Beth. "But I'm sure he'd take the same liberty again if he had the chance."

"He admits that his love of art destroys his sense of propriety," said Patsy.

As they rose from the table Arthur deliberately turned to view the party in the other corner, and then to the amazement of his friends he coolly walked over and shook the elder lady's hand with evident pleasure. Next moment he was being introduced to the two girls. The three cousins and their Uncle John walked out of the dining hall and awaited Arthur Weldon in the lobby.

"It is some old acquaintance, of course," said Louise. "Arthur knows a tremendous lot of people and remembers everyone he ever has met."

When he rejoined them he brought the lady and the two beautiful girls with him, introducing Mrs. Montrose as one of his former acquaintances in New York, where she had been a near neighbor to the Weldons. The girls, who proved to be her nieces instead of her daughters, were named Maud and Florence Stanton, Maud being about eighteen years of age and Florence perhaps fifteen. Maud's beauty was striking, as proved by Patsy's admiration at first sight; Florence was smaller and darker, yet very dainty and witching, like a Dresden shepherdess.

The sisters proved rather shy at this first meeting, being content to exchange smiles with the other girls, but their aunt was an easy conversationalist and rambled on about the delights of Hollywood and southern California until they were all in a friendly mood. Among other things Mrs. Montrose volunteered the statement that they had been at the hotel for several weeks, but aside from that remark disclosed little of their personal affairs. Presently the three left the hotel and drove away in an automobile, having expressed a wish to meet their new friends again and become better acquainted with them.

"I was almost startled at running across Mrs. Montrose out here," said Arthur. "After father's death, when I gave up the old home, I lost track of the Montroses; but I seem to remember that old Montrose went to the happy hunting grounds and left a widow, but no children. I imagine these people are wealthy, as Montrose was considered a successful banker. I'll write to Duggins and inquire about them."

"Duggins seems to know everything," remarked Louise.

"He keeps pretty good track of New York people, especially of the old families," replied her husband.

"I can't see what their history matters to us," observed Patsy. "I like to take folks as I find them, without regard to their antecedents or finances. Certainly those Stanton girls are wonderfully attractive and ladylike."

But now the baby claimed their attention and the rest of that day was passed in "visiting" and cuddling the wee Toodlums, who seemed to know her girl aunties and greeted them with friendly coos and dimpled smiles.

On Sunday they took a motor trip through the mountain boulevards and on their way home passed the extensive enclosure of the Continental Film Company. A thriving village has been built up at this place, known as Film City, for many of those employed by the firm prefer to live close to their work. Another large "plant" of the same concern is located in the heart of Hollywood.

As they passed through Film City Uncle John remarked:

"We are invited to visit this place and witness the making of a motion picture. I believe it would prove an interesting sight."

"Let us go, by all means," replied Arthur. "I am greatly interested in this new industry, which seems to me to be still in its infancy. The development of the moving picture is bound to lead to some remarkable things in the future, I firmly believe."

"So do I," said Uncle John. "They'll combine the phonograph with the pictures, for one thing, so that the players, instead of being silent, will speak as clearly as in real life. Then we'll have the grand operas, by all the most famous singers, elaborately staged; and we'll be able to see and hear them for ten cents, instead of ten dollars. It will be the same with the plays of the greatest actors."

"That would open up a curious complication," asserted Louise. "The operas would only be given once, before the camera and the recorder. Then what would happen to all the high-priced opera singers?"

"They would draw royalties on all their productions, instead of salaries," replied Arthur.

"Rather easy for the great artists!" observed Patsy. "One performance--and the money rolling in for all time to come."

"Well, they deserve it," declared Beth. "And think of what the public would gain! Instead of having to suffer during the performances of incompetent actors and singers, as we do to-day, the whole world would be able to see and hear the best talent of the ages for an insignificant fee. I hope your prediction will come true, Uncle John."

"It's bound to," he replied, with confidence. "I've read somewhere that Edison and others have been working on these lines for years, and although they haven't succeeded yet, anything possible in mechanics is bound to be produced in time."

CHAPTER IV - AUNT JANE'S NIECES

The picture, which was entitled "The Sacrifice," proved--to use Patsy's words--"a howling success." On Monday afternoons the little theatres are seldom crowded, so Mr. Merrick's party secured choice seats where they could observe every detail of the photography. The girls could not wait for a later performance, so eager were they to see themselves in a motion picture, nor were they disappointed to find they were a mere incident in the long roll of film.

The story of the photo-play was gripping in its intensity, and since Mr. Werner had clearly explained the lesson it conveyed, they followed the plot with rapt attention. In the last scene their entrance and exit was transitory, but they were obliged to admit that their features were really expressive of fear. The next instant the wall fell, burying its victims, and this rather bewildered them when they remembered that fully half an hour had elapsed while the dummies were being placed in position, the real people removed from danger and preparations made to topple over the wall from the inside of the building. But the camera had been inactive during that period and so cleverly had the parts of the picture been united that no pause whatever was observable to the spectators.

"My! what a stuffy place," exclaimed Louise, as they emerged into the light of day. "I cannot understand why it is necessary to have these moving picture theatres so gloomy and uncomfortable."

"It isn't necessary," replied Uncle John. "It's merely a habit the builders have acquired. There seemed to be a total lack of ventilation in that place."

"No one expects much for ten cents," Arthur reminded him. "If the pictures are good the public will stand for anything in the matter of discomfort."

"Did you notice," said Patsy, slowly, "how many children there were in that theatre?"

"Yes, indeed," answered Beth. "The pictures seem to be an ideal amusement for children. I do not suppose they can understand all the dramas and love stories, but the pictures entertain them, whatever the theme may be."

"They are not allowed to go unless accompanied by a parent or guardian," Arthur stated; "but I saw a group of eleven under the care of one cheery-looking old lady, so I suppose the little ones evade the law in that way."

On Tuesday forenoon they drove to the office of the Continental Film Manufacturing Company and inquired for Mr. Werner. Every approach to the

interior of the big stockade was closely guarded in order to prevent the curious from intruding, but Werner at once hurried out to greet them and escorted them into the enclosure.

"You are just in time," said he, "to witness one of the scenes in our great picture, 'Samson and Delilah.' They're getting it on now, so you must hurry if you want to see the work. It's really the biggest thing our firm has ever turned out."

They passed a group of low but extensive frame buildings, threading their way between them until finally they emerged within a large open space where huge frames covered with canvas were propped up in broad daylight and apparently in great disorder. Huddled here and there were groups of people wearing Oriental costumes of the Bible days, their skins stained brown, the make-up on their faces showing hideously in the strong light. A herd of meek donkeys, bearing burdens of faggots, was tethered near by.

"Follow me closely," cautioned their guide, "so you will not step over the 'dead line' and get yourselves in the picture."

"What is the 'dead line'?" inquired Uncle John.

"The line that marks the limit of the camera's scope. Outside of that you are quite safe. You will notice it is plainly marked in chalk."

They passed around to the front and were amazed at the picture disclosed by the reverse of the gaunt, skeleton-like framework. For now was displayed Solomon's temple in all its magnificence, with huge pillars supporting a roof that seemed as solid and substantial as stone and mortar could make it.

The perspective was wonderful, for they could follow a line of vision through the broad temple to a passage beyond, along which was approaching a procession of priests, headed by dancing girls and musicians beating tomtoms and playing upon reeds. The entire scene was barbaric in its splendor and so impressive that they watched it spellbound, awed and silent.

Yet here beside them was the motion-picture camera, clicking steadily away and operated by a man in his shirt-sleeves who watched the scene with sharp eyes, now frowning and now nodding approval. Beside him at times, but rushing from one point to another just outside the chalk-marks that indicated the "dead line," was the director of this production, who shouted commands in a nervous, excited manner and raged and tore his hair when anything went wrong.

Something went very wrong presently, for the director blew a shrill blast on his whistle and suddenly everything stopped short. The camera man threw a cloth over his lenses and calmly lighted a cigarette. The procession halted in

uncertainty and became a disordered rabble; but the director sprang into the open space and shouted at his actors and actresses in evident ill temper.

"There it is again!" he cried. "Five hundred feet of good film, ruined by the stupidity of one person. Get out of that priest's robe, Higgins, and let Jackson take your place. Where's Jackson, anyhow?"

"Here," answered a young man, stepping out from a group of spectators.

"Do you know the work? Can you lead that procession into the temple so they will leave room for Delilah to enter, and not crowd her off the platform?" asked the director.

Jackson merely nodded as he scrambled into the priest's robe which the discomfited Higgins resigned to him. Evidently the bungling actor was in disgrace, for he was told to go to the office and get his pay and then "clear out."

So now the procession was sent back into the passage and rearranged in proper order; the signal was given to begin and in an instant the camera renewed its clicking as the operator slowly revolved the handle that carried the long strip of film past the lenses. The musicians played, the girls danced, the procession slowly emerged from the passage.

This time it advanced properly and came to a halt just at the head of the staircase leading up to the entrance to the temple.

"Delilah!" shouted the director, and now appeared a beautiful girl who made a low obeisance to the chief priest.

"Why--goodness me!" cried Patsy. "It's--it's Maud Stanton!"

"Nonsense!" returned Arthur, sharply; and then he looked again and drew a long breath; for unless it were indeed the elder niece of Mrs. Montrose, there must be two girls in the world identically alike.

Mr. Werner settled the question by quietly remarking: "Of course it's Maud Stanton. She's our bright, particular star, you know, and the public would resent it if she didn't appear as the heroine of all our best pictures."

"An actress!" exclaimed Arthur. "I--I didn't know that."

"She and her sister Flo are engaged by us regularly," replied Werner, with an air of pride. "They cost us a lot of money, as you may imagine, but we can't afford to let any competitor have them."

If Arthur Weldon felt any chagrin at this, discovery it was not in the least shared by the others of his party. Beth was admiring the young girl's grace and dignity; Patsy was delighted by her loveliness in the fleecy, picturesque costume she wore;

Louise felt pride in the fact that she had been introduced to "a real actress," while Uncle John wondered what adverse fortune had driven this beautiful, refined girl to pose before a motion picture camera.

They soon discovered Florence Stanton in the picture, too, among the dancing girls; so there could be no mistake of identity. Mrs. Montrose was not visible during the performance; but afterward, when Samson had pulled down the pillars of the temple and it had fallen in ruins, when the "show" was over and the actors trooping away to their dressing-rooms, then the visitors were ushered into the main office of the establishment to meet Mr. Goldstein, the manager, and seated by the window was the aunt of the two girls, placidly reading a book. She looked up with a smile as they entered.

"Did you see the play?" she asked. "And isn't it grand and impressive? I hope you liked Maud's 'Delilah.' The poor child has worked so hard to create the character."

They assured her the girl was perfect in her part, after which Mr. Merrick added: "I'm astonished you did not go out to see the play yourself."

She laughed at his earnestness.

"It's an old story to me," she replied, "for I have watched Maud rehearse her part many times. Also it is probable that some--if not all--of the scenes of 'Samson and Delilah' will be taken over and over, half a dozen times, before the director is satisfied."

"The performance seemed quite perfect to-day," said Uncle John. "I suppose, Mrs. Montrose, you do not--er--er--act, yourself?"

"Oh. I have helped out, sometimes, when a matronly personation is required, but my regular duties keep me busily engaged in the office."

"May we ask what those duties are?" said Louise.

"I'm the reader of scenarios."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Patsy. "I'm sure we don't know any more than we did before."

"A 'scenario,'" said the lady, "is a description of the plot for a photo-play. It is in manuscript form and hundreds of scenarios are submitted to us from every part of the country, and by people in all walks of life."

"I shouldn't think you could use so many," said Beth.

"We can't, my dear," responded the lady, laughing at her simplicity. "The majority of the scenarios we receive haven't a single idea that is worth considering. In most of the others the ideas are stolen, or duplicated from some other picture-play."

Once in a while, however, we find a plot of real merit, and then we accept it and pay the author for it."

"How much?" inquired Arthur.

"So little that I am ashamed to tell you. Ideas are the foundation of our business, and without them we could not make successful films; but when Mr. Goldstein buys an idea he pays as little for it as possible, and the poor author usually accepts the pittance with gratitude."

"We were a little surprised," Uncle John ventured to say, "to find you connected with this--er--institution. I suppose it's all right; but those girls--your nieces--"

"Yes, they are motion picture actresses, and I am a play reader. It is our profession, Mr. Merrick, and we earn our living in this way. To be frank with you, I am very proud of the fact that my girls are popular favorites with the picture theatre audiences."

"That they are, Mrs. Montrose!" said Goldstein, the manager, a lean little man, earnestly endorsing the statement; "and that makes them the highest priced stars in all our fourteen companies of players. But they're worth every cent we pay 'em--and I hope ev'rybody's satisfied."

Mrs. Montrose paid little deference to the manager. "He is only a detail man," she explained when Goldstein had gone way, "but of course it is necessary to keep these vast and diverse interests running smoothly, and the manager has enough details on his mind to drive an ordinary mortal crazy. The successful scenario writers, who conceive our best plays, are the real heart of this business, and the next to them in importance are the directors, or producers, who exercise marvelous cleverness in staging the work of the authors."

"I suppose," remarked Arthur Weldon, "it is very like a theatre."

"Not so like as you might imagine," was the reply. "We employ scenery, costumes and actors, but not in ways theatrical, for all our work is subservient to the camera's eye and the requirements of photography."

While they were conversing, the two Stanton girls entered the office, having exchanged their costumes for street clothes and washed the make-up from their faces, which were now fresh and animated.

"Oh, Aunt Jane!" cried Flo, running to Mrs. Montrose, "we're dismissed for the day. Mr. McNeil intends to develop the films before we do anything more, and Maud and I want to spend the afternoon at the beach."

The lady smiled indulgently as Maud quietly supported her sister's appeal, the while greeting her acquaintances of yesterday with her sweet, girlish charm of manner.

"A half-holiday is quite unusual with us," she explained, "for it is the custom to hold us in readiness from sunrise to sunset, in case our services are required. An actress in a motion picture concern is the slave of her profession, but we don't mind the work so much as we do waiting around for orders."

"Suppose we all drive to the beach together," suggested Mr. Merrick. "We will try to help you enjoy your holiday and it will be a rich treat to us to have your society."

"Yes, indeed!" exclaimed Patsy Doyle. "I'm just crazy over this motion picture business and I want to ask you girls a thousand questions about it."

They graciously agreed to the proposition and at once made preparations for the drive. Mrs. Montrose had her own automobile, but the party divided, the four young girls being driven by Mr. Merrick's chauffeur in his machine, while Uncle John, Arthur and Louise rode with Mrs. Montrose.

It did not take the young people long to become acquainted, and the air of restraint that naturally obtained in the first moments gradually wore away. They were all in good spirits, anticipating a jolly afternoon at the ocean resorts, so when they discovered themselves to be congenial companions they lost no time in stilted phrases but were soon chattering away as if they had known one another for years.

CHAPTER V - A THRILLING RESCUE

"It must be fine to be an actress," said Patsy Doyle, with enthusiasm. "If I had the face or the figure or the ability--all of which I sadly lack--I'd be an actress myself."

"I suppose," replied Maud Stanton, thoughtfully, "it is as good a profession for a girl as any other. But the life is not one of play, by any means. We work very hard during the rehearsals and often I have become so weary that I feared I would drop to the ground in sheer exhaustion. Flo did faint, once or twice, during our first engagement with the Pictograph Company; but we find our present employers more considerate, and we have gained more importance than we had in the beginning."

"It is dreadfully confining, though," remarked Florence, with a sigh. "Our hours are worse than those of shopgirls, for the early morning sun is the best part of the day for our work. Often we are obliged to reach the studio at dawn. To be sure, we have the evenings to ourselves, but we are then too tired to enjoy them."

"Did you choose, this profession for amusement, or from necessity?" inquired Beth, wondering if the question sounded impertinent.

"Stern necessity," answered Maud with a smile. "We had our living to earn."

"Could not your aunt assist you?" asked Patsy.

"Aunt Jane? Why, she is as poor as we are."

"Arthur Weldon used to know the Montroses," said Beth, "and he believed Mr. Montrose left his widow a fortune."

"He didn't leave a penny," asserted Florence. "Uncle was a stock gambler, and when he died he was discovered to be bankrupt."

"I must explain to you," said Maud, "that our father and mother were both killed years ago in a dreadful automobile accident. Father left a small fortune to be divided between Flo and me, and appointed Uncle George our guardian. We were sent to a girls' school and nicely provided for until uncle's death, when it was found he had squandered our little inheritance as well as his own money."

"That was hard luck," said Patsy sympathetically.

"I am not so sure of that," returned the girl musingly. "Perhaps we are happier now than if we had money. Our poverty gave us dear Aunt Jane for a companion and brought us into a field of endeavor that has proved delightful."

"But how in the world did you ever decide to become actresses, when so many better occupations are open to women?" inquired Beth.

"Are other occupations so much better? A motion picture actress is quite different from the stage variety, you know. Our performances are all privately conducted, and although the camera is recording our actions it is not like being stared at by a thousand critical eyes."

"A million eyes stare at the pictures," asserted Patsy.

"But we are not there to be embarrassed by them," laughed Flo.

"We have but one person to please," continued Maud, "and that is the director. If at first the scene is not satisfactory, we play it again and again, until it is quite correct. To us this striving for perfection is an art. We actors are mere details of an artistic conception. We have now been in Hollywood for five months, yet few people who casually notice us at the hotel or on the streets have any idea that we act for the 'movies.' Sometimes we appear publicly in the streets, in characteristic costume, and proceed to enact our play where all may observe us; but there are so many picture companies in this neighborhood that we are no longer looked upon as a novelty and the people passing by pay little attention to us."

"Were you in that picture of the falling wall?" asked Beth.

"No. We were rehearsing for 'Samson and Delilah.' But sometimes we are called upon to do curious things. One night, not long ago, a big residence burned down in the foothills back of our hotel. At the first alarm of fire one of the directors wakened us and we jumped into our clothes and were whisked in an automobile to the scene of the conflagration. The camera-man was already there and, while we had to dodge the fire-fighters and the hose men, both Flo and I managed to be 'saved from the flames' by some of our actors--not once, but several times."

"It must have been thrilling!" gasped Patsy.

"It was exciting, at the moment," confessed Maud. "One of the pictures proved very dramatic, so an author wrote a story where at the climax a girl was rescued from the flames by her lover, and we took our time to act the several scenes that led up to the fire. The completed picture was a great success, I'm told."

"Those directors must be wonderfully enterprising fellows," said Beth.

"They are, indeed, constantly on the lookout for effects. Every incident that occurs in real life is promptly taken advantage of. The camera-men are everywhere, waiting for their chance. Often their pictures prove of no value and are destroyed, but sometimes the scenes they catch are very useful to work into a picture play. A few weeks ago I was shipwrecked on the ocean and saved by clinging to a raft. That was not pleasant and I caught a severe cold by being in

the water too long; but I was chosen because I can swim. Such incidents are merely a part of our game--a game where personal comfort is frequently sacrificed to art. Once Flo leaped over a thirty-foot precipice and was caught in a net at the bottom. The net was, of course, necessary, but when the picture was displayed her terrible leap was followed by a view of her mangled body at the bottom of the canyon."

"How did they manage to do that?" asked Patsy.

"Stopped the camera, cut off the piece of film showing her caught by the net, and substituted a strip on which was recorded Flo's body lying among the jagged rocks, where it had been carefully and comfortably arranged. We do a lot of deceptive tricks of that sort, and sometimes I myself marvel at the natural effects obtained."

"It must be more interesting than stage acting."

"I believe it is. But we've never been on the stage," said Maud.

"How did you happen to get started in such a queer business?" inquired Patsy.

"Well, after we found ourselves poor and without resources we began wondering what we could do to earn money. A friend of Aunt Jane's knew a motion picture maker who wanted fifty young girls for a certain picture and would pay each of them five dollars a day. Flo and I applied for the job and earned thirty dollars between us; but then the manager thought he would like to employ us regularly, and with Auntie to chaperon us we accepted the engagement. The first few weeks we merely appeared among the rabble--something like chorus girls, you see--but then we were given small parts and afterward more important ones. When we discovered our own value to the film makers Auntie managed to get us better engagements, so we've acted for three different concerns during the past two years, while Aunt Jane has become noted as a clever judge of the merits of scenarios."

"Do both of you girls play star parts?" Beth inquired.

"Usually. Flo is considered the best 'child actress' in the business, but when there is no child part she makes herself useful in all sorts of ways. To-day, for instance, you saw her among the dancing girls. I do the ingenue, or young girl parts, which are very popular just now. I did not want to act 'Delilah,' for I thought I was not old enough; but Mr. McNeil wanted me in the picture and so I made myself look as mature as possible."

"You were ideal!" cried Patsy, admiringly.

The young girl blushed at this praise, but said deprecatingly:

"I doubt if I could ever be a really great actress; but then, I do not intend to act for many more years. Our salary is very liberal at present, as Goldstein grudgingly informed you, and we are saving money. As soon as we think we have acquired enough to live on comfortably we shall abandon acting and live as other girls do."

"The fact is," added Flo, "no one will employ us when we have lost our youth. So we are taking advantage of these few fleeting years to make hay while the sun shines."

"Do many stage actresses go into the motion picture business?" asked Beth.

"A few, but all are not competent," replied Maud. "In the 'silent drama' facial expression and the art of conveying information by a gesture is of paramount importance. In other words, action must do the talking and explain everything. I am told that some comedians, like 'Bunny' and Sterling Mace, were failures on the stage, yet in motion pictures they are great favorites. On the other hand, some famous stage actors can do nothing in motion pictures."

On their arrival at Santa Monica Mr. Merrick invited the party to be his guests at luncheon, which was served in a cosy restaurant overlooking the ocean. And then, although at this season it was bleak winter back East, all but Uncle John and Aunt Jane took a bath in the surf of the blue Pacific, mingling with hundreds of other bathers who were enjoying the sport.

Mrs. Montrose and Uncle John sat on the sands to watch the merry scene, while the young people swam and splashed about, and they seemed--as Miss Patsy slyly observed--to "get on very well together."

"And that is very creditable to your aunt," she observed to Maud Stanton, who was beside her in the water, "for Uncle John is rather shy in the society of ladies and they find him hard to entertain."

"He seems like a dear old gentleman," said Maud.

"He is, indeed, the dearest in all the world. And, if he likes your Aunt Jane, that is evidence that she is all right, too; for Uncle John's intuition never fails him in the selection of friends. He--"

"Dear me!" cried Maud; "there's someone in trouble, I'm sure."

She was looking out across the waves, which were fairly high to-day, and Patsy saw her lean forward and strike out to sea with strokes of remarkable swiftness. Bathers were scattered thickly along the coast, but only a few had ventured far out beyond the life-lines, so Patsy naturally sought an explanation by gazing at those farthest out. At first she was puzzled, for all the venturesome seemed to be swimming strongly and composedly; but presently a dark form showed on the

crest of a wave--a struggling form that tossed up its arms despairingly and then disappeared.

She looked for Maud Stanton and saw her swimming straight out, but still a long way from the person in distress. Then Patsy, always quick-witted in emergencies, made a dash for the shore where a small boat was drawn up on the beach.

"Come, Arthur, quick!" she cried to the young man, who was calmly wading near the beach, and he caught the note of terror in her voice and hastened to help push the little craft into the water.

"Jump in!" she panted, "and row as hard as you ever rowed in all your life."

Young Weldon was prompt to obey. He asked no useless questions but, realizing that someone was in danger, he pulled a strong, steady oar and let Patsy steer the boat.

The laughter and merry shouts of the bathers, who were all unaware that a tragedy was developing close at hand, rang in the girl's ears as she peered eagerly ahead for a sign to guide her. Now she espied Maud Stanton, far out beyond the others, circling around and diving into this wave or that as it passed her.

"Whoever it was," she muttered, half aloud, "is surely done for by this time. Hurry, Arthur! I'm afraid Maud has exhausted all her strength."

But just then Maud dived again and when she reappeared was holding fast to something dark and inanimate. A moment later the boat swept to her side and she said:

"Get him aboard, if you can. Don't mind me; I'm all right."

Arthur reached down and drew a slight, boyish form over the gunwale, while Patsy clasped Maud's hand and helped the girl over the side. She was still strong, but panted from her exertions to support the boy.

"Who is it?" inquired Patsy, as Arthur headed the boat for the shore.

Maud shook her head, leaning forward to look at the face of the rescued one for the first time.

"I've never seen him before," she said. "Isn't it too bad that I reached him too late?"

Patsy nodded, gazing at the white, delicate profile of the young fellow as he lay lifeless at her feet. Too late, undoubtedly; and he was a mere boy, with all the interests of life just unfolding for him.

Their adventure had now been noticed by some of the bathers, who crowded forward to meet the boat as it grounded on the beach. Uncle John, always keeping an eye on his beloved nieces, had noted every detail of the rescue and as a dozen strong men pulled the boat across the sands, beyond the reach of the surf, the Merrick automobile rolled up beside it.

"Now, then!" cried the little man energetically, and with the assistance of his chauffeur he lifted the lifeless form into the car.

"The hospital?" said Patsy, nodding approval.

"Yes," he answered. "No; you girls can't come in your wet bathing suits. I'll do all that can be done."

Even as he spoke the machine whirled away, and looking after it Maud said, shaking her head mildly: "I fear he's right. Little can be done for the poor fellow now."

"Oh, lots can be done," returned Patsy; "but perhaps it won't bring him back to life. Anyhow, it's right to make every attempt, as promptly as possible, and certainly Uncle John didn't waste any time."

Beth and Florence now joined them and Louise came running up to ask eager questions.

"Who was it, Patsy?"

"We don't know. Some poor fellow who got too far out and had a cramp, perhaps. Or his strength may have given out. He didn't seem very rugged."

"He was struggling when first I saw him," said Maud. "It seemed dreadful to watch the poor boy drowning when hundreds of people were laughing and playing in the water within earshot of him."

"That was the trouble," declared Arthur Weldon. "All those people were intent on themselves and made so much noise that his cries for help could not be heard."

The tragedy, now generally known, had the effect of sobering the bathers and most of them left the water and trooped to the bathhouses to dress. Mrs. Montrose advised the girls to get their clothes on, as all were shivering--partly from nervousness--in their wet bathing suits.

They were ready an hour before Mr. Merrick returned, and his long absence surprised them until they saw his smiling face as he drove up in his car. It gave them a thrill of hope as in chorus they cried:

"Well--Uncle John?"

"I think he will live," returned the little man, with an air of great satisfaction.

"Anyway, he's alive and breathing now, and the doctors say there's every reason to expect a rapid recovery."

"Who is he?" they asked, crowding around him.

"A. Jones."

"A--what?" This from Patsy, in a doubtful tone.

"Jones. A. Jones."

"Why, he must have given you an assumed name!"

"He didn't give us any name. As soon as he recovered consciousness he fell asleep, and I left him slumbering as peacefully as a baby. But we went through his clothes, hoping to get a trace of his friends, so they could be notified. His bathing suit is his own, not rented, and the name 'A. Jones' is embroidered on tape and sewn to each piece. Also the key to bathhouse number twenty-six was tied to his wrist. The superintendent sent a man for his clothing and we examined that, too. The letters 'A.J.' were stamped in gold on his pocketbook, and in his cardcase were a number of cards engraved: 'A. Jones, Sangoa.' But there were no letters, or any other papers."

"Where is Sangoa?" inquired Beth.

"No one seems to know," confessed Uncle John. "There was plenty of money in his pocket-book and he has a valuable watch, but no other jewelry. His clothes were made by a Los Angeles tailor, but when they called him up by telephone he knew nothing about his customer except that he had ordered his suit and paid for it in advance. He called for it three days ago, and carried it away with him, so we have no clue to the boy's dwelling place."

"Isn't that a little strange--perhaps a little suspicious?" asked Mrs. Montrose.

"I think not, ma'am," answered Mr. Merrick. "We made these investigations at the time we still feared he would die, so as to communicate with any friends or relatives he might have. But after he passed the crisis so well and fell asleep, the hospital people stopped worrying about him. He seems like any ordinary, well-to-do young fellow, and a couple of days in the hospital ought to put him upon his feet again."

"But Sangoa, Uncle; is that a town or a country?"

"Some out-of-the-way village, I suppose. People are here from every crack and corner of America, you know."

"It sounds a bit Spanish," commented Arthur. "Maybe he is from Mexico."

"Maybe," agreed Uncle John. "Anyhow, Maud has saved his life, and if it's worth anything to him he ought to be grateful."

"Never mind that," said Maud, flushing prettily with embarrassment as all eyes turned upon her, "I'm glad I noticed him in time; but now that he is all right he need never know who it was that rescued him. And, for that matter, sir, Patsy Doyle and Mr. Weldon did as much for him as I. Perhaps they saved us both, while your promptness in getting him to the hospital was the main factor in saving his life."

"Well, it's all marked down in the hospital books," remarked Uncle John. "I had to tell the whole story, you see, as a matter of record, and all our names are there, so none can escape the credit due her--or him."

"In truth," said Mrs. Montrose with a smile, "it really required four of you to save one slender boy."

"Yes, he needed a lot of saving," laughed Flo. "But," her pretty face growing more serious, "I believe it was all Fate, and nothing else. Had we not come to the beach this afternoon, the boy might have drowned; so, as I suggested the trip, I'm going to take a little credit myself."

"Looking at it in that light," said Patsy, "the moving picture man saved the boy's life by giving you a half-holiday."

This caused a laugh, for their spirits were now restored to normal. To celebrate the occasion, Mr. Merrick proposed to take them all into Los Angeles to dine at a "swell restaurant" before returning to Hollywood.

This little event, in conjunction with the afternoon's adventure, made them all more intimate, so that when they finally reached home and separated for the night they felt like old friends rather than recent acquaintances.

CHAPTER VI - A. JONES

There was work for the Stanton girls at the "film factory," as they called it, next morning, so they had left the hotel before Mr. Merrick's party assembled at the breakfast table.

"I must telephone the Santa Monica hospital and find out how our patient is," remarked Uncle John, when the meal was over; but presently he returned from the telephone booth with a puzzled expression upon his face. "A. Jones has disappeared!" he announced.

"Disappeared! What do you mean, Uncle?" asked Beth.

"He woke early and declared he was himself again, paid his bill, said 'good morning' to the hospital superintendent and walked away. He wouldn't answer questions, but kept asking them. The nurse showed him the book with the record of how he was saved, but she couldn't induce him to say who he was, where he came from nor where he was going. Seems a little queer, doesn't it?"

They all confessed that it did.

"However," said Patsy Doyle, "I'm glad he recovered, and I'm sure Maud will be when she hears the news. The boy has a perfect right to keep his own counsel, but he might have had the grace to tell us what that initial 'A.' stands for, and where on earth Sangoa is."

"I've been inquiring about Sangoa," announced Arthur, just then joining the group, "and no one seems wiser than we are. There's no record of such a town or state in Mexico, or in the United States--so far as I can discover. The clerk has sent for a map of Alaska, and perhaps we'll find Sangoa there."

"What does it matter?" inquired Louise.

"Why, we don't like to be stumped," asserted Patsy, "that's all. Here is a young man from Sangoa, and--"

"Really," interrupted Beth, who was gazing through the window, "I believe here is the young man from Sangoa!"

"Where?" they all cried, crowding forward to look.

"Coming up the walk. See! Isn't that the same mysterious individual whose life Maud saved?"

"That's the identical mystery," declared Uncle John. "I suppose he has come here to look us up and thank us."

"Then, for heaven's sake, girls, pump him and find out where Sangoa is," said Arthur hastily, and the next moment a bell boy approached their party with a card.

They looked at the young fellow curiously as he came toward them. He seemed not more than eighteen years of age and his thin features wore a tired expression that was not the result of his recent experience but proved to be habitual. His manner was not languid, however, but rather composed; at the same time he held himself alert, as if constantly on his guard. His dress was simple but in good taste and he displayed no embarrassment as he greeted the party with a low bow.

"Ah," said Uncle John, heartily shaking his hand, "I am delighted to find you so perfectly recovered."

A slight smile, sad and deprecating, flickered for an instant over his lips. It gave the boyish face a patient and rather sweet expression as he slowly replied:

"I am quite myself to-day, sir, and I have come to assure you of my gratitude for your rescue of me yesterday. Perhaps it wasn't worth all your bother, but since you generously took the trouble to save me, the least I can do is to tender you my thanks." Here he looked from one to another of the three girls and continued: "Please tell me which young lady swam to my assistance."

"Oh, it was none of us," said Patsy. "Miss Stanton--Maud Stanton--swam out to you, when she noticed you were struggling, and kept you afloat until we--until help came."

"And Miss Stanton is not here?"

"Not at present, although she is staying at this hotel."

He gravely considered this information for a moment. As he stood there, swaying slightly, he appeared so frail and delicate that Uncle John seized his arm and made him sit down in a big easy chair. The boy sighed, took a memorandum from his pocket and glanced at it.

"Miss Doyle and Mr. Weldon pulled out in a boat and rescued both Miss Stanton and me, just as we were about to sink," he said. "Tell me, please, if either Miss Doyle or Mr. Weldon is present."

"I am Arthur Weldon," said that young gentleman; "but I was merely the boatman, under command of Miss Doyle, whom I beg to present to you."

A. Jones looked earnestly into Patsy's face. Holding out his hand he said with his odd smile: "Thank you." Then he turned to shake Arthur's hand, after which he continued: "I also am indebted to Mr. Merrick for carrying me to the hospital. The doctor told me that only this prompt action enabled them to resuscitate me at all. And now, I believe it would be courteous for me to tell you who I am and how I came to be in such dire peril."

He paused to look around him questioningly and the interest on every face was clearly evident. Arthur took this opportunity to introduce Jones to Louise and Beth and then they all sat down again. Said Uncle John to the stranger, in his frank and friendly way:

"Tell us as much or as little as you like, my boy. We are not unduly inquisitive, I assure you."

"Thank you, sir. I am an American, and my name is Jones. That is, I may claim American parentage, although I was born upon a scarcely known island in the Pacific which my father purchased from the government of Uruguay some thirty years ago."

"Sangoa?" asked Arthur.

He seemed surprised at the question but readily answered:

"Yes; Sangoa. My father was a grandnephew of John Paul Jones and very proud of the connection; but instead of being a sailor he was a scientist, and he chose to pass his life in retirement from the world."

"Your father is no longer living, then?" said Mr. Merrick.

"He passed away a year ago, on his beloved island. My mother died several years before him. I began to feel lonely at Sangoa and I was anxious to visit America, of which my mother had so often told me. So some months ago I reached San Francisco, since when I have been traveling over your country--my country, may I call it?--and studying your modern civilization. In New York I remained fully three months. It is only about ten days since I returned to this coast."

He stopped abruptly, as if he considered he had told enough. The brief recital had interested his auditors, but the ensuing pause was rather embarrassing.

"I suppose you have been visiting relatives of your parents," remarked Uncle John, to ease the situation.

"They--had no relatives that I know of," he returned. "I am quite alone in the world. You must not suppose I am unaccustomed to the water," he hastened to add, as if to retreat from an unpleasant subject. "At Sangoa I have bathed in the sea ever since I can remember anything; but--I am not in good health. I suffer

from indigestion, a chronic condition, which is my incubus. Yesterday my strength suddenly deserted me and I became helpless."

"How fortunate it was that Maud noticed you!" exclaimed Patsy, with generous sympathy.

Again the half sad smile softened his face as he looked at her.

"I am not sure it was wholly fortunate for me," he said, "although I admit I have no wish to end my uninteresting life by drowning. I am not a misanthrope, in spite of my bad stomach. The world is more useful to me than I am to the world, but that is not my fault. Pardon me for talking so much about myself."

"Oh, we are intensely interested, I assure you," replied Patsy. "If some of us were indeed the instruments that saved you yesterday, it is a pleasure to us to know something of the--the man--we saved."

She had almost said "boy," he was such a youthful person, and he knew it as well as she did.

"I would like to meet Miss Stanton and thank her personally," he presently resumed. "So, if you have no objection, I think I shall register at this hotel and take a room. I--I am not very strong yet, but perhaps Miss Stanton will see me when I have rested a little."

"She won't return before five o'clock," explained Mr. Merrick. "Miss Stanton is--er--connected with a motion picture company, you know, and is busy during the day."

He seemed both surprised and perplexed, at first, but after a moment's thought he said:

"She is an actress, then?"

"Yes; she and her sister. They have with them an aunt, Mrs. Montrose, for companion."

"Thank you. Then I will try to meet them this evening."

As he spoke he rose with some difficulty and bade them adieu. Arthur went with him to the desk and proffered his assistance, but the young man said he needed nothing but rest.

"And just think of it," said Patsy, when he had gone. "We don't know yet what that 'A' stands for!"

"Arthur," suggested Louise.

"Albert," said Beth.

"Or Algernon," added Uncle John with a chuckle.

"But we haven't seen the last of him yet," declared Miss Doyle. "I've a romance all plotted, of which A. Jones is to be the hero. He will fall in love with Maud and carry her away to his island!"

"I'm not so sure of that result," observed Uncle John thoughtfully. "It wouldn't astonish me to have him fall in love with Maud Stanton; we've all done that, you know; but could Maud--could any girl--be attracted by a lean, dismal boy with a weak stomach, such as A. Jones?"

"Even with these drawbacks he is quite interesting," asserted Beth.

"He is sure to win her sympathy," said Louise.

"But, above all," declared Patsy, "he has an island, inherited from his royal daddy. That island would count for a lot, with any girl!"

CHAPTER VII - THE INVALID

The girls intercepted Maud Stanton when she returned to the hotel that evening, and told her all about A. Jones. The tale was finished long before that dyspeptic youth had wakened from his slumbers. Then they all dressed for dinner and afterward met in the lobby, where Uncle John told them he had arranged to have a big round table prepared for the entire party, including a seat for A. Jones, who might like to join them.

However, the young man did not make his appearance, and as they trooped into the dining room Patsy said resentfully:

"I believe A. Jones is in a trance and needs rolling on a barrel again."

"He probably found himself too weak to appear in public," replied Flo Stanton. "I'm sure if I had been all but drowned a few hours ago, I would prefer bed to society."

"I'm astonished that he summoned energy to visit us at all," declared Mrs. Montrose. "He may be weak and ill, but at least he is grateful."

"Jones seems a vary gentlemanly young fellow," said Mr. Merrick. "He is a bit shy and retiring, which is perhaps due to his lonely life on his island; but I think he has been well brought up."

As they came out from dinner they observed the porters wheeling several big trunks up the east corridor. The end of each trunk was lettered: "A. Jones."

"Well," said Beth, with an amused smile, "he intends to stay a while, anyhow. You'll have a chance to meet him yet, Maud."

"I'm glad of that," answered Maud, "for I am anxious to calculate the worth of the life I helped to save. Your reports are ambiguous, and I am undecided whether you are taking the boy seriously or as a joke. From your description of his personal appearance, I incline to the belief that under ordinary circumstances I would not look twice at Mr. Jones, but having been partly instrumental in preserving him to the world, I naturally feel a proprietary interest in him."

"Of course," said Flo. "He's worth one look, out of pure curiosity; but it would be dreadful to have him tagging you around, expressing his everlasting gratitude."

"I don't imagine he'll do that," observed Patsy Doyle. "A. Jones strikes me as having a fair intellect in a shipwrecked body, and I'll wager a hatpin against a glove-buttoner that he won't bore you. At the same time he may not interest you--"

or any of us--for long, unless he develops talents we have not discovered. I wonder why he doesn't use his whole name. That mystic 'A' puzzles me."

"It's an English notion, I suppose," said Mrs. Montrose.

"But he isn't English; he's American."

"Sangoese," corrected Beth.

"Perhaps he doesn't like his name, or is ashamed of it," suggested Uncle John.

"It may be 'Absalom,'" said Flo. "We once knew an actor named Absalom, and he always called himself 'A. Judson Keith.' He was a dignified chap, and when we girls one day called him 'Ab,' he nearly had hysterics."

"Mr. Werner had hysterics to-day," asserted Maud, gravely; "but I didn't blame him. He sent out a party to ride down a steep hill on horseback, as part of a film story, and a bad accident resulted. One of the horses stepped in a gopher hole and fell, and a dozen others piled up on him, including their riders."

"How dreadful!" was the general exclamation.

"Several of the horses broke their legs and had to be shot," continued Maud; "but none of the riders was seriously injured except little Sadie Martin, who was riding a bronco. The poor thing was caught under one of the animals and the doctor says she won't be able to work again for months."

"Goodness me! And all for the sake of a picture?" cried Patsy indignantly. "I hope you don't take such risks, Maud."

"No; Flo and I have graduated from what is called 'the bronco bunch,' and now do platform work entirely. To be sure we assume some minor risks in that, but nothing to compare with the other lines of business."

"I hope the little girl you mentioned will get well, and has enough money to tide her over this trouble," said Uncle John anxiously.

"The manager will look after her," returned Mrs. Montrose. "Our people are very good about that and probably Sadie Martin's salary will continue regularly until she is able to work again."

"Well," said Beth, drawing a long breath, "I suppose we shall read all about it in the morning papers."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Maud and added: "These accidents never get into the papers. They happen quite often, around Los Angeles, where ten thousand or more people make their living from motion pictures; but the public is protected from all

knowledge of such disasters, which would detract from their pleasure in pictures and perhaps render all films unpopular."

"I thought the dear public loved the dare-devil acts," remarked Arthur Weldon.

"Oh, it does," agreed Mrs. Montrose; "yet those who attend the picture theatres seem not to consider the action taking place before their eyes to be real. Here are pictures only--a sort of amplified story book--and the spectators like them exciting; but if they stopped to reflect that men and women in the flesh were required to do these dangerous feats for their entertainment, many would be too horrified to enjoy the scenes. Of course the makers of the pictures guard their actors in all possible ways; yet, even so, casualties are bound to occur."

They had retired to a cosy corner of the public drawing room and were conversing on this interesting topic when they espied A. Jones walking toward them. The youth was attired in immaculate evening dress, but his step was slow and dragging and his face pallid.

Arthur and Uncle John drew up an easy chair for him while Patsy performed the introductions to Mrs. Montrose and her nieces. Very earnestly the boy grasped the hand of the young girl who had been chiefly responsible for his rescue, thanking her more by his manner than in his few carefully chosen words.

As for Maud, she smilingly belittled her effort, saying lightly: "I know I must not claim that it didn't amount to anything, for your life is valuable, Mr. Jones, I'm sure. But I had almost nothing to do beyond calling Patsy Doyle's attention to you and then swimming out to keep you afloat until help came. I'm a good swimmer, so it was not at all difficult."

"Moreover," he added, "you would have done the same thing for anyone in distress."

"Certainly."

"I realize that. I am quite a stranger to you. Nevertheless, my gratitude is your due and I hope you will accept it as the least tribute I can pay you. Of all that throng of bathers, only you noticed my peril and came to my assistance."

"Fate!" whispered Flo impressively.

"Nonsense," retorted her sister. "I happened to be the only one looking out to sea. I think, Mr. Jones, you owe us apologies more than gratitude, for your folly was responsible for the incident. You were altogether too venturesome. Such action on this coast, where the surf rolls high and creates an undertow, is nothing less than foolhardy."

"I'm sure you are right," he admitted. "I did not know this coast, and foolishly imagined the old Pacific, in which I have sported and played since babyhood, was my friend wherever I found it."

"I hope you are feeling better and stronger this evening," said Mr. Merrick. "We expected you to join us at dinner."

"I--I seldom dine in public," he explained, flushing slightly. "My bill-of-fare is very limited, you know, owing to my--my condition; and so I carry my food-tablets around with me, wherever I go, and eat them in my own room."

"Food-tablets!" cried Patsy, horrified.

"Yes. They are really wafers--very harmless--and I am permitted to eat nothing else."

"No wonder your stomach is bad and you're a living skeleton!" asserted the girl, with scorn.

"My dear," said Uncle John, gently chiding her, "we must give Mr. Jones the credit for knowing what is best for him."

"Not me, sir!" protested the boy, in haste. "I'm very ignorant about--about health, and medicine and the like. But in New York I consulted a famous doctor, and he told me what to do."

"That's right," nodded the old gentleman, who had never been ill in his life.

"Always take the advice of a doctor, listen to the advice of a lawyer, and refuse the advise of a banker. That's worldly wisdom."

"Were you ill when you left your home?" inquired Mrs. Montrose, looking at the young man with motherly sympathy.

"Not when I left the island," he said. "I was pretty well up to that time. But during the long ocean voyage I was terribly sick, and by the time we got to San Francisco my stomach was a wreck. Then I tried to eat the rich food at your restaurants and hotels--we live very plainly in Sangoa, you know--and by the time I got to New York I was a confirmed dyspeptic and suffering tortures. Everything I ate disagreed with me. So I went to a great specialist, who has invented these food tablets for cases just like mine, and he ordered me to eat nothing else."

"And are you better?" asked Maud.

He hesitated.

"Sometimes I imagine I am. I do not suffer so much pain, but I--I seem to grow weaker all the time."

"No wonder!" cried Patsy. "If you starve yourself you can't grow strong."

He looked at her with an expression of surprise. Then he asked abruptly:

"What would you advise me to do, Miss Doyle?"

A chorus of laughter greeted this question. Patsy flushed a trifle but covered her confusion by demanding: "Would you follow my advice?"

He made a little grimace. There was humor in the boy, despite his dyspepsia.

"I understand there is a law forbidding suicide," he replied. "But I asked your advice in an attempt to discover what you thought of my absurd condition. Now that you call my attention to it, I believe I am starving myself. I need stronger and more nourishing food; and yet the best specialist in your progressive country has regulated my diet."

"I don't believe much in specialists," asserted Patsy. "If you do, go ahead and kill yourself, in defiance of the law. According to common sense you ought to eat plenty of good, wholesome food, but you may be so disordered--in your interior--that even that would prove fatal. So I won't recommend it."

"I'm doomed, either way," he said quietly. "I know that."

"How do you know it?" demanded Maud in a tone of resentment.

He was silent a moment. Then he replied:

"I cannot remember how we drifted into this very personal argument. It seems wrong for me to be talking about myself to those who are practically strangers, and you will realize how unused I am to the society of ladies by considering my rudeness in this interview."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Uncle John; "we are merely considering you as a friend. You must believe that we are really interested in you," he continued, laying a kindly hand on the young fellow's shoulder. "You seem in a bad way, it's true, but your condition is far from desperate. Patsy's frankness--it's her one fault and her chief virtue--led you to talk about yourself, and I'm surprised to find you so despondent and--and--what do you call it, Beth?"

"Pessimistic?"

"That's it--pessimistic."

"But you're wrong, sir!" said the boy with a smile; "I may not be elated over my fatal disease, but neither am I despondent. I force myself to keep going when I wonder how the miserable machine responds to my urging, and I shall keep it going, after a fashion, until the final breakdown. Fate weaves the thread of our

lives, I truly believe, and she didn't use very good material when she started mine. But that doesn't matter," he added quickly. "I'm trying to do a little good as I go along and not waste my opportunities. I'm obeying my doctor's orders and facing the future with all the philosophy I can summon. So now, if you--who have given me a new lease of life--think I can use it to any better advantage, I am willing to follow your counsel."

His tone was more pathetic than his words. Maud, as she looked at the boy and tried to realize that his days were numbered, felt her eyes fill with tears. Patsy sniffed scornfully, but said nothing. It was Beth who remarked with an air of unconcern that surprised those who knew her unsympathetic nature:

"It would be presumptuous for us to interfere, either with Fate or with Nature. You're probably dead wrong about your condition, for a sick person has no judgment whatever, but I've noticed the mind has a good deal to do with one's health. If you firmly believe you're going to die, why, what can you expect?"

No one cared to contradict this and a pause followed that was growing awkward when they were all aroused by the sound of hasty footsteps approaching their corner.

CHAPTER VIII - THE MAGIC OF A NAME

The newcomer proved to be Goldstein, the manager of the Continental. His face was frowning and severe as he rudely marched up to the group and, without the formality of a greeting, pointedly addressed the Stanton girls.

"What does it mean?" he demanded in evident excitement, for his voice shook and the accusing finger he held out trembled. "How does it happen that my people, under contract to work for the Continental, are working for other firms?"

Maud paled and her eyes glistened with resentment as she rose and faced her manager. Florence pulled her sister's sleeve and said with a forced laugh: "Sit down, Maud; the man has probably been drinking."

He turned on the young girl fiercely, but now it was Arthur Weldon who seized the manager's arm and whirled him around.

"Sir, you are intruding," he said sternly. "If you have business with these ladies, choose the proper time and place to address them."

"I have!" cried Goldstein, blusteringly. "They have treated me shamefully--unprofessionally! They have played me a trick, and I've the right to demand why they are working for a rival firm while in my pay."

Mrs. Montrose now arose and said with quiet dignity:

"Mr. Goldstein, you are intruding, as Mr. Weldon says. But you have said so much to defame my nieces in the eyes of our friends, here assembled, that you must explain yourself more fully."

The manager seemed astonished by his reception. He looked from one to another and said more mildly:

"It is easy enough for me to explain, but how can the Stantons explain their conduct? They are under contract to act exclusively for the Continental Film Company and I pay them a liberal salary. Yet only yesterday, when I was kind enough to give them a holiday, they went down to the beach and posed for a picture for our rivals, the Corona Company!"

"You are mistaken, sir!" retorted Arthur. "The young ladies were in our company the entire afternoon and they did not pose for any picture whatever."

"Don't tell me!" cried Goldstein. "I've just seen the picture down town. I was going by one of the theatres when I noticed a placard that read: 'Sensational Film by

Maud Stanton, the Queen of Motion Picture Actresses, entitled "A Gallant Rescue!" First run to-night.' I went in and saw the picture--with my own eyes!-- and I saw Maud Stanton in a sea scene, rescuing a man who was drowning. Don't deny it, Miss," he added, turning upon Maud fiercely. "I saw it with my own eyes-- not an hour ago!"

After a moment's amazed silence his hearers broke into a chorus of laughter, led by Flo, who was almost hysterical. Even A. Jones smiled indulgently upon the irate manager, who was now fairly bristling with indignation.

"The Corona people," remarked Arthur Weldon, "are quite enterprising. I did not know they had a camera-man at the beach yesterday, but he must have secured a very interesting picture. It was not posed, Mr. Goldstein, but taken from life."

"It was Maud Stanton!" asserted, the manager.

"Yes; she and some others. A man was really drowning and the brave girl swam to his rescue, without a thought of posing."

"I don't believe it!" cried the man rudely.

Here A. Jones struggled to his feet.

"It is true," he said. "I was the drowning man whom Miss Stanton saved."

Goldstein eyed him shrewdly.

"Perhaps you were," he admitted, "for the man in the picture was about your style of make-up. But how can you prove it was not a put-up job with the Corona people? How do I know you are not all in the employ of the Corona people?"

"I give you my word."

"Pah! I don't know you."

"I see you don't," returned the youth stiffly.

"Here is my card. Perhaps you will recognize the name."

He fumbled in his pocket, took out a card and handed it to the manager. Goldstein looked at it, started, turned red and then white and began bobbing his head with absurd deference to the youth.

"Pardon, Mr. Jones--pardon!" he gasped. "I--I heard you were in our neighborhood, but I--I did not recognize you. I--I hope you will pardon me, Mr. Jones! I was angry at what I supposed was the treachery of an employee. You will--will--understand that, I am sure. It is my duty to protect the interests of the

Continental, you know, sir. But it's all right now, of course! Isn't it all right now, Mr. Jones?"

"You'd better go, Goldstein," said the boy in a weary tone, and sat down again.

The manager hesitated. Then he bowed to Maud Stanton and to the others, murmuring:

"All a mistake, you see; all a mistake. I--I beg everybody's pardon."

With this he backed away, still bowing, and finally turned and beat a hasty retreat. But no one was noticing him especially. All eyes were regarding the boy with a new curiosity.

"That Goldstein is an ill-bred boor!" remarked Uncle John in an annoyed tone.

"I suppose," said Maud, slowly, "he thought he was right in demanding an explanation. There is great rivalry between the various film manufacturers and it was rather mean of the Corona to put my name on that placard."

"It's wonderful!" exclaimed Patsy. "How did they get the picture, do you suppose?"

"They have camera-men everywhere, looking for some picture worth while." explained Mrs. Montrose. "If there's a fire, the chances are a camera-man is on the spot before the firemen arrive. If there's an accident, it is often caught by the camera before the victim realizes what has happened. Perhaps a camera-man has been at the beach for weeks, waiting patiently for some tragedy to occur. Anyway, he was on hand yesterday and quietly ran his film during the excitement of the rescue. He was in rare luck to get Maud, because she is a favorite with the public; but it was not fair to connect her name with the picture, when they know she is employed by the Continental."

Young Jones rose from his chair with a gesture of weariness.

"If you will excuse me," he said, "I will go to my room. Our little conversation has given me much pleasure; I'm so alone in the world. Perhaps you will allow me to join you again--some other time?"

They hastened to assure him his presence would always be welcome. Patsy even added, with her cheery smile, that they felt a certain proprietorship in him since they had dragged him from a watery grave. The boy showed, as he walked away, that he was not yet very steady on his feet, but whether the weakness was the result of his malady or his recent trying experience they could not determine.

"What staggers me," said Maud, looking after him, "is the effect his name had on Goldstein, who has little respect or consideration for anyone. Who do you suppose A. Jones is?"

"Why, he has told us," replied Louise. "He is an islander, on his first visit to this country."

"He must be rather more than that," declared Arthur. "Do you remember what the manager said to him?"

"Yes," said Beth. "He had heard that A. Jones was in this neighborhood, but had never met him. A. Jones was a person of sufficient importance to make the general manager of the Continental Film Company tremble in his boots."

"He really did tremble," asserted Patsy, "and he was abject in his apologies."

"Showing," added Flo Stanton, "that Goldstein is afraid of him."

"I wonder why," said Maud.

"It is all very easy of solution," remarked Arthur. "Goldstein believes that Jones is in the market to buy films. Perhaps he's going to open a motion picture theatre on his island. So the manager didn't want to antagonize a good customer."

"That's it," said Uncle John, nodding approval. "There's no great mystery about young Jones, I'm sure."

CHAPTER IX - DOCTOR PATSY

Next morning Uncle John and the Weldons--including the precious baby--went for a ride into the mountains, while Beth and Patsy took their embroidery into a sunny corner of the hotel lobby.

It was nearly ten o'clock when A. Jones discovered the two girls and came tottering toward them. Tottering is the right word; he fairly swayed as he made his way to the secluded corner.

"I wish he'd use a cane," muttered Beth in an undertone. "I have the feeling that he's liable to bump his nose any minute."

Patsy drew up a chair for him, although he endeavored to prevent her.

"Are you feeling better this morning?" she inquired.

"I--I think so," he answered doubtfully. "I don't seem to get back my strength, you see."

"Were you stronger before your accident?" asked Beth.

"Yes, indeed. I went swimming, you remember. But perhaps I was not strong enough to do that. I--I'm very careful of myself, yet I seem to grow weaker all the time."

There was a brief silence, during which the girls plied their needles.

"Are you going to stay in this hotel?" demanded Patsy, in her blunt way.

"For a time, I think. It is very pleasant here," he said.

"Have you had breakfast?"

"I took a food-tablet at daybreak."

"Huh!" A scornful exclamation. Then she glanced at the open door of the dining-hall and laying aside her work she rose with a determined air and said:

"Come with me!"

"Where?"

For answer she assisted him to rise. Then she took his hand and marched him across the lobby to the dining room.

He seemed astonished at this proceeding but made no resistance. Seated at a small table she called a waitress and said:

"Bring a cup of chocolate, a soft-boiled egg and some toast."

"Pardon me, Miss Doyle," he said; "I thought you had breakfasted."

"So I have," she replied. "The breakfast I've ordered is for you, and you're going to eat it if I have to ram it down your throat."

"But--Miss Doyle!"

"You've told us you are doomed. Well, you're going to die with a full stomach."

"But the doctor--"

"Bother the doctor! I'm your doctor, now, and I won't send in a bill, thank your stars."

He looked at her with his sad little smile.

"Isn't this a rather high-handed proceeding, Miss Doyle?"

"Perhaps."

"I haven't employed you as my physician, you know."

"True. But you've deliberately put yourself in my power."

"How?"

"In the first place, you tagged us here to this hotel."

"You don't mind, do you?"

"Not in the least. It's a public hostelry. In the second place, you confided to us your disease and your treatment of it--which was really none of our business."

"I--I was wrong to do that. But you led me on and--I'm so lonely--and you all seemed so generous and sympathetic--that I--I--"

"That you unwittingly posted us concerning your real trouble. Do you realize what it is? You're a hypo--hypo--what do they call it?--hypochondriac!"

"I am not!"

"And your doctor--your famous specialist--is a fool."

"Oh, Miss Doyle!"

"Also you are a--a chump, to follow his fool advice. You don't need sympathy, Mr. A. Jones. What you need is a slapstick."

"A--a--"

"A slapstick. And that's what you're going to get if you don't obey orders."

Here the maid set down the breakfast, ranging the dishes invitingly before the invalid. His face had expressed all the emotions from amazement to terror during Patsy's tirade and now he gazed from her firm, determined features to the eggs and toast, in an uncertain, helpless way that caused the girl a severe effort to curb a burst of laughter.

"Now, then," she said, "get busy. I'll fix your egg. Do you want more sugar in your chocolate? Taste it and see. And if you don't butter that toast before it gets cold it won't be fit to eat."

He looked at her steadily now, again smiling.

"You're not joking, Miss Doyle?"

"I'm in dead earnest."

"Of course you realize this is the--the end?"

"Of your foolishness? I hope so. You used to eat like a sensible boy, didn't you?"

"When I was well."

"You're well now. Your only need is sustaining, strengthening food. I came near ordering you a beefsteak, but I'll reserve that for lunch."

He sipped the chocolate.

"Yes; it needs more sugar," he said quietly. "Will you please butter my toast? It seems to me such a breakfast is worth months of suffering. How delicious this egg is! It was the fragrance of the egg and toast that conquered me. That, and--"

"And one sensible, determined girl. Don't look at me as if I were a murderess! I'm your best friend--a friend in need. And don't choke down your food. Eat slowly. Fletcherize--chew your food, you know. I know you're nearly famished, but you must gradually accustom yourself to a proper diet."

He obeyed meekly. Patsy's face was calm, but her heart beat fast, with a thrill of fear she could not repress. Acting on impulse, as she had, the girl now began to consider that she was personally responsible for whatever result might follow this radical treatment for dyspepsia. Had she been positive it was dyspepsia, she would never have dared interfere with a doctor's orders; but she felt that the boy

needed food and would die unless he had it. He might die from the effect of this unusual repast, in which case she would never forgive herself.

Meantime, the boy had cast aside all fear. He had protested, indeed, but his protests being overruled he accepted his food and its possible consequences with philosophic resignation and a growing satisfaction.

Patsy balked on the third slice of toast and took it away from him. She also denied him a second cup of chocolate. He leaned back in his chair with a sigh of content and said:

"Bless the hen that laid that egg! No dainty was ever more delicious. And now," he added, rising, "let us go and inquire the address of a good undertaker. I have made my will, and I'd like to be cremated--it's so much nicer than the old-fashioned burial, don't you think?"

"I'll attend to all that, if you wish," she replied, trying to repress a shudder as she followed him from the room. "Do you smoke?"

"I used to, but the doctor forbade it; so I gave it up entirely."

"Go over to that stand and buy a cigar. Then you may sit beside Beth and me and smoke it."

The girl did not wholly approve of smoking and had often chided Uncle John and her father and Arthur Weldon for indulging in the habit; but this advice to young Jones was given in desperation, because all the men of her family stoutly affirmed that a cigar after a meal assisted digestion. She resumed her former seat beside Beth, and her cousin quickly read the anxiety on her face.

"What did you do, Patricia?"

"I fed him."

"Did he really eat?"

"Like a starved cat."

"Hm-m-m," said Beth. "What next, I wonder?"

Patsy wondered, too, the cold shivers chasing one another up and down her back. The boy was coming toward them, coolly puffing a cigar. He did not seem to totter quite so much as before, but he was glad to sink into an easy chair.

"How do you feel?" asked Beth, regarding him curiously.

"Like one of those criminals who are pampered with all the good things of life before being led to the scaffold."

"Any pains?"

He shook his head.

"Not yet. I've asked the clerk, whenever I signal him, to send someone to carry me to my room. If I'm not able to say good-bye to you, please accept now my thanks for all your kindness to a stranger. You see, I'm not sure whether I'll have a sudden seizure or the pains will come on gradually."

"What pains?" demanded Patsy.

"I can't explain them. Don't you believe something is bound to happen?" he inquired, nervously removing the ash from his cigar.

"To be sure. You're going to get well."

He made no reply, but sat watching Beth's nimble fingers. Patsy was too excited to resume her embroidery.

"I wonder if you are old enough to smoke?" remarked Beth.

"I'm over twenty-one."

"Indeed! We decided you were about eighteen."

"But we are not Spanish in Sangoa."

"What are your people?"

"Formerly all Americans. The younger generation are, like myself I suppose, Sangoans by birth. But there isn't a black or yellow or brown man on our island."

"How many inhabitants has Sangoa?"

"About six hundred, all told."

There was silence for a while.

"Any pains yet?" inquired Beth.

"Not yet. But I'm feeling drowsy. With your permission I'll lie down and take a nap. I slept very little last night."

He threw away his cigar, which he had smoked nearly to the end, and rising without assistance, bowed and walked away.

"Will he ever waken, I wonder?" said Beth softly.

"Of course," declared Patsy. "He has crossed the Rubicon and is going to get well. I feel it in my bones!"

"Let us hope," responded Beth, "that Ajo also feels it in his bones, rather than in his stomach."

CHAPTER X - STILL A MYSTERY

The day advanced to luncheon time and Uncle John and the Weldons came back from their mountain trip. Hollywood is in the foothills and over the passes are superb automobile roads into the fruitful valleys of San Fernando and La Canada.

"Seen anything of the boy--A. Jones?" inquired Arthur.

"Yes; and perhaps we've seen the last of him," answered Beth.

"Oh. Has he gone?"

"No one knows. Patsy fed him and he went to sleep. What has happened since we cannot tell."

The girls then related the experiences of the morning, at which both Uncle John and Arthur looked solemn and uncomfortable. But Louise said calmly:

"I think Patsy was quite right. I wouldn't have dared such a thing myself, but I'm sure that boy needed a square meal more than anything. If he dies, that breakfast has merely hastened his end; but if he doesn't die it will do him good."

"There's another possibility," remarked Uncle John. "He may be suffering agonies with no one to help him."

Patsy's face was white as chalk. The last hour or two had brought her considerable anxiety and her uncle's horrible suggestion quite unnerved her. She stole away to the office and inquired the number of Mr. Jones' room. It was on the ground floor and easily reached by a passage. The girl tiptoed up to the door and putting her ear to the panel listened intently. A moment later a smile broke over her face; she chuckled delightedly and then turned and ran back to her friends.

"He's snoring like a walrus!" she cried triumphantly.

"Are you sure they are not groans?" asked Arthur.

"Pah! Can't I recognize a snore when I hear it? And I'll bet it's the first sound sleep he's had in a month."

Mr. Merrick and Arthur went to the door of the boy's room to satisfy themselves that Patsy was not mistaken, and the regularity of the sounds quickly convinced them the girl was right. So they had a merry party at luncheon, calling Patsy "Doctor" with grave deference and telling her she had probably saved the life of A. Jones for a second time.

"And now," proposed Uncle John, when the repast was over, "let us drive down to the sea and have a look at that beautiful launch that came in yesterday. Everyone is talking about it and they say it belongs to some foreign prince."

So they motored to Santa Monica and spent the afternoon on the sands, watching the bathers and admiring the graceful outlines of the big yacht lying at anchor a half mile from the shore. The boat was something of a mystery to everybody. It was named the "Arabella" and had come from Hawaii via San Francisco; but what it was doing here and who the owner might be were questions no one seemed able to answer. Rumor had it that a Japanese prince had come in it to inspect the coast line, but newspaper reporters were forbidden to scale the side and no satisfaction was given their eager questioning by the bluff old captain who commanded the craft. So the girls snapped a few kodak pictures of the handsome yacht and then lost interest in it.

That evening they met Mrs. Montrose and the Stanton girls at dinner and told them about the boy, who still remained invisible. Uncle John had listened at his door again, but the snores had ceased and a deathlike silence seemed to pervade the apartment. This rendered them all a trifle uneasy and when they left the dining room Arthur went to the hotel clerk and asked:

"Have you seen Mr. Jones this evening?"

"No," was the reply. "Do you know him?"

"Very slightly."

"Well, he's the queerest guest we've ever had. The first day he ate nothing at all. This morning I hear he had a late breakfast. Wasn't around to lunch, but a little while ago we sent a meal to his room that would surprise you."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. A strange order it was! Broiled mushrooms, pancakes with maple syrup and ice cream. How is that for a mix-up--and at dinner time, too!" said the clerk, disgustedly.

Arthur went back and reported.

"All right," said Patsy, much relieved. "We've got him started and now he can take care of himself. Come, Uncle; let's all go down town and see the picture that drove Mr. Goldstein crazy."

"He was very decent to us to-day," asserted Flo Stanton.

"Did he ask any explanation about Maud's appearing in the picture of a rival company?" inquired Arthur.

"No, not a word."

"Did he mention Mr. Jones, who conquered him so mysteriously?" asked Beth.

"Not at all. Goldstein confined himself strictly to business; but he treated us with unusual courtesy," explained Maud.

They were curious to see the films of the rescue, and the entire party rode to the down-town theatre where the Corona picture was being run. Outside the entrance they found the audacious placard, worded just as Goldstein had reported, and they all agreed it was a mean trick to claim another firm's star as their own.

"I do not think the Corona Company is responsible for this announcement," said Uncle John. "It is probably an idea of the theatre proprietor, who hoped to attract big business in that way."

"He has succeeded," grumbled Arthur, as he took his place at the end of a long line of ticket buyers.

The picture, as it flashed on the screen, positively thrilled them. First was shown the crowd of merry bathers, with Patsy and Maud standing in the water a little apart from the others. Then the boy--far out beyond the rest--threw up his arms, struggling desperately. Maud swam swiftly toward him, Patsy making for the shore. The launching of the boat, the race to rescue, Maud's effort to keep the drowning one afloat, and the return to the shore, where an excited crowd surrounded them--all was clearly shown in the picture. Now they had the advantage of observing the expressions on the faces of the bathers when they discovered a tragedy was being enacted in their midst. The photographs were so full of action that the participants now looked upon their adventure in a new light and regarded it far more seriously than before.

The picture concluded with the scene where Uncle John lifted the body into the automobile and dashed away with it to the hospital.

Maud Stanton, used as she was to seeing herself in motion pictures, was even more impressed than the others when observing her own actions at a time when she was wholly unconscious that a camera-man had his lens focused upon her.

"It's a great picture!" whispered Flo, as they made their way out of the crowded theatre. "Why can't all our films be as natural and absorbing as this one?"

"Because," said her sister, "in this case there is no acting. The picture carries conviction with a force that no carefully rehearsed scene could ever accomplish."

"That is true," agreed her Aunt Jane. "The nature scenes are the best, after all."

"The most unsatisfactory pictures I have ever seen," remarked Uncle John, "were those of prominent men, and foreign kings, and the like, who stop before the camera and bow as awkwardly as a camel. They know they are posing, and in spite of their public experience they're as bashful as schoolboys or as arrogant as policemen, according to their personal characteristics."

"Did you notice the mob of children in that theatre?" asked Patsy, as they proceeded homeward. "I wish there were more pictures made that are suitable to their understandings."

"They enjoy anything in the way of a picture," said Arthur. "It isn't necessary to cater to children; they'll go anyhow, whatever is shown."

"That may be, to an extent, true," said Beth. "Children are fascinated by any sort of motion pictures, but a lot of them must be wholly incomprehensible to the child mind. I agree with Patsy that the little ones ought to have their own theatres and their own pictures."

"That will come, in time," prophesied Aunt Jane. "Already the film makers are recognizing the value of the children's patronage and are trying to find subjects that especially appeal to them."

They reached the hotel soon after ten o'clock and found "Ajo" seated in the lobby. He appeared much brighter and stronger than the day before and rose to greet Patsy with a smile that had lost much of its former sad expression.

"Congratulate me, Dr. Doyle," said he. "I'm still alive, and--thanks to your prescription--going as well as could be expected."

"I'm glad I did the right thing," she replied; "but we were all a little worried for fear I'd make a mistake."

"I have just thrown away about a thousand of those food-tablets," he informed her with an air of pride. "I am positive there is no substitute for real food, whatever the specialists may say. In fact," he continued more soberly, "I believe you have rescued me a second time from certain death, for now I have acquired a new hope and have made up my mind to get well."

"Be careful not to overdo it," cautioned Uncle John. "You ordered a queer supper, we hear."

"But it seemed to agree with me. I've had a delightful sleep--the first sound sleep in a month--and already I feel like a new man. I waited up to tell you this, hoping you would be interested."

"We are!" exclaimed Patsy, who felt both pride and pleasure. "This evening we have been to see the motion picture of your rescue from drowning."

"Oh. How did you like it?"

"It's a splendid picture. I'm not sure it will interest others as much as ourselves, yet the people present seemed to like it."

"Well it was their last chance to observe my desperate peril and my heroic rescue," said the boy. "The picture will not be shown after to-night."

"Why not?" they asked, in surprise.

"I bought the thing this afternoon. It didn't seem to me quite modest to exploit our little adventure in public."

This was a new phase of the strange boy's character and the girls did not know whether to approve it or not.

"It must have cost you something!" remarked Flo, the irrepressible. "Besides, how could you do it while you were asleep?"

"Why, I wakened long enough to use the telephone," he replied with a smile. "There are more wonderful inventions in the world than motion pictures, you know."

"But you like motion pictures, don't you?" asked Maud, wondering why he had suppressed the film in question.

"Very much. In fact, I am more interested in them than in anything else, not excepting the telephone--which makes Aladdin's lamp look like a firefly in the sunshine."

"I suppose," said Flo, staring into his face with curious interest, "that you will introduce motion pictures into your island of Sangoa, when you return?"

"I suppose so," he answered, a little absently. "I had not considered that seriously, as yet, but my people would appreciate such a treat, I'm sure."

This speech seemed to destroy, in a manner, their shrewd conjecture that he was in America to purchase large quantities of films. Why, then, should Goldstein have paid such abject deference to this unknown islander?

In his own room, after the party had separated for the night, Mr. Merrick remarked to Arthur Weldon as they sat smoking their cigars:

"Young Jones is evidently possessed of some means."

"So it seems," replied Arthur. "Perhaps his father, the scientific recluse, had accumulated some money, and the boy came to America to get rid of it. He will be

extravagant and wasteful for awhile, and then go back to his island with the idea that he has seen the world."

Uncle John nodded.

"He is a rather clean-cut young fellow," said he, "and the chances are he won't become dissipated, even though he loses his money through lack of worldly knowledge or business experience. A boy brought up and educated on an island can't be expected to prove very shrewd, and whatever the extent of his fortune it is liable to melt like snow in the sunshine."

"After all," returned Arthur, "this experience won't hurt him. He will still have his island to return to."

They smoked for a time in silence.

"Has it ever occurred to you, sir," said Arthur, "that the story Jones has related to us, meager though it is, bears somewhat the stamp of a fairy tale?"

Uncle John removed his cigar and looked reflectively at the ash.

"You mean that the boy is not what he seems?"

"Scarcely that, sir. He seems like a good boy, in the main. But his story is--such as one might invent if he were loath to tell the truth."

Uncle John struck a match and relit his cigar.

"I believe in A. Jones, and I see no reason to doubt his story," he asserted. "If real life was not full of romance and surprises, the novelists would be unable to interest us in their books."

CHAPTER XI - A DAMSEL IN DISTRESS

The day had not started auspiciously for the Stanton sisters. Soon after they arrived at the Continental Film Company's plant Maud had wrenched her ankle by stumbling over some loose planks which had been carelessly left on the open-air stage, and she was now lying upon a sofa in the manager's room with her limb bandaged and soaked with liniment.

Flo was having troubles, too. A girl who had been selected by the producer to fall from an aeroplane in mid-air had sent word she was ill and could not work today, and the producer had ordered Flo to prepare for the part. Indignantly she sought the manager, to file a protest, and while she waited in the anteroom for an audience, Mr. A. Jones of Sangoa came in and greeted her with a bow and a smile.

"Good gracious! Where did you come from?" she inquired.

"My hotel. I've just driven over to see Goldstein," he replied.

"You'll have to wait, I'm afraid," she warned him. "The manager is busy just now. I've been wiggling on this bench half an hour, and haven't seen him yet--and my business is very important."

"So is mine, Miss Flo," he rejoined, looking at her with an odd expression. Then, as a stenographer came hurrying from the inner room, he stopped the girl and said:

"Please take my card to Mr. Goldstein."

"Oh, he won't see anybody now, for he's busy talking with one of our producers. You'll have to call again," she said flippantly. But even as she spoke she glanced at the card, started and turned red. "Oh, pardon me!" she added hastily and fled back to the managerial sanctum.

"That's funny!" muttered Flo, half to herself.

"Yes," he said, laughing, "my cards are charged with electricity, and they're bound to galvanize anyone in this establishment. Come in, Miss Flo," he added, as Goldstein rushed out of his office to greet the boy effusively; "your business takes precedence to mine, you know."

The manager ushered them into his office, a big room with a busy aspect. At one end were two or three girls industriously thumping typewriters; McNeil, the producer, was sorting manuscript on Goldstein's own desk; a young man who

served as the manager's private secretary was poring over a voluminous record-book, wherein were listed all the films ever made by the manufacturers of the world. On a sofa in a far corner reclined the injured "star" of the company, Maud Stanton, who--being half asleep at the moment--did not notice the entrance of her sister and young Jones.

"Sit down, Mr. Jones; pray sit down!" exclaimed Goldstein eagerly, pointing to his own chair. "Would you like me to clear the room, so that our conversation may be private?"

"Not yet," replied the boy, refusing the seat of honor and taking a vacant chair. "Miss Stanton has precedence, and I believe she wishes to speak with you."

Goldstein took his seat at the desk and cast an inquiring glance at Flo.

"Well?" he demanded, impatiently.

"Mr. Werner has ordered me to do the airship stunt for his picture, because Nance Holden isn't here to-day," began the girl.

"Well, why annoy me with such trifles? Werner knows what he wants, and you'll do as well as the Holden girl."

"But I don't want to tumble out of that airship," she protested.

"There's no danger. Life nets will be spread underneath the aeroplane," said the manager. "The camera merely catches you as you are falling, so the thing won't be more than twenty or thirty feet from the ground. Now run away and don't bother. I must speak with Mr. Jones."

"But I'm afraid, Mr. Goldstein!" pleaded the girl. "I don't want to go up in the aeroplane, and these stunts are not in my line, or what I was engaged to do."

"You'll do what I tell you!" asserted the manager, with marked irritation. "I won't stand for any rebellion among my actors, and you'll do as Werner orders or you'll forfeit your week's pay."

Here Maud half rose from her sofa to address her employer.

"Please, Mr. Goldstein," she said, "don't make Flo do that fall. There are plenty of other girls to take her place, and she--"

"Silence, Miss Stanton!" roared the manager. "You'll disrupt all discipline if you interfere. A nice time we'd have here, if we allowed our actors to choose their own parts! I insist that your sister obey my producer's orders."

"Quite right, Goldstein," remarked young Jones, in his quiet voice. "You've carried your point and maintained discipline. I like that. Miss Flo Stanton will do exactly

what you request her to do. But you're going to change your mind and think better of her protest. I'm almost sure, Goldstein, from the expression of your face, that you intend to issue prompt orders that another girl must take her place."

Goldstein looked at him steadily a moment and the arrogant expression changed to one of meek subservience.

"To be sure!" he muttered. "You have read my mind accurately, Mr. Jones. Here, Judd," to his secretary, "find Werner and tell him I don't approve his choice of Flo Stanton as a substitute for Nance Holden. Let's see; tell him to put that Moore girl in her place."

The young fellow bowed and left the room. McNeil smiled slyly to himself as he bent over his manuscript. Jones had gone to Maud's side to inquire anxiously after her injury.

"I don't imagine it will amount to much," she said reassuringly. "Mr. Goldstein wants me to rest quietly until this afternoon, when our new photo-play is to be produced. I'm to do the leading part, you know, and he thinks I'll be able by that time to get through all right."

Goldstein overheard this and came toward them, rubbing his hands together nervously.

"That seems unwise, Miss Maud," objected Jones. "To use your foot so soon might make it much worse. Let us postpone the play until some other time."

Goldstein's face was a study. His body twitched spasmodically.

"Oh, Mr. Jones!" he exclaimed; "that's impossible; it wouldn't do at all! We've been rehearsing this play and preparing for its production for the last two weeks, and to-day all our actors and assistants are here and ready to make the picture. I've already postponed it four hours--until this afternoon--to favor Miss Stanton, but, really--"

"Never mind the details," interrupted the boy. "I do not consider Miss Stanton able to do her work to-day. Send her back to her hotel at once and order the play postponed until she is able to attend."

Goldstein was greatly disturbed by this order, issued quietly but in a tone of command that brooked no opposition. Again he glanced shrewdly at the young man, and in the manager's face astonishment and fear were intermingled.

"Sir," he said in repressed tones, for he was really angry and had been accustomed to wield the power of an autocrat in this establishment, "you are placing me in an embarrassing position. I am expected to make every day count, so that the Continental may pay a liberal profit to its owners. To follow your

instructions would burden us with an enormous expense, quite useless, I assure you, and--"

"Very well. Incur the expense, Goldstein."

"All right, Mr. Jones. Excuse me a moment while I issue instructions for the postponement."

McNeil rose and faced the manager.

"Are you really going to postpone this important play?" he demanded, in a voice of wonder.

Goldstein was glad to vent his chagrin on the producer.

"No insolence, sir!" he roared. "Come with me, and," as he dragged McNeil to the door and paused there, "if you dare lisp a word of what you've overheard, I'll fire you like a shot!"

When they had left the room Maud said with a puzzled air:

"I can't understand your power over Goldstein, Mr. Jones. He is a dictator--almost a tyrant--and in this place his word is law. At least, it was until you came, and--and--"

"Don't try to understand it, Miss Stanton," he answered in a careless manner. "Do you think you can manage to crawl to the automobile, or shall we carry you?"

"I'll bet Goldstein has murdered someone, and Mr. Jones knows all about it!" exclaimed Flo, who had been an interested witness of the scene.

Maud stood up, with her sister's support, and tested her lame ankle.

"It still hurts a little," she said, "but I can manage to hobble on it."

"Get your sister's wraps," the boy said to Flo, "and we'll send her straight home."

"I expect Goldstein will dock my salary, as well as fine Flo," remarked Maud musingly, as she waited for her hat and coat. "He obeyed you very meekly, Mr. Jones, but I could see a wicked glitter in his eye, nevertheless."

"I am sure the manager will neither dock nor fine either of you," he replied reassuringly. "On the contrary, you might sue the company for damages, for leaving that lumber where you would fall over it."

"Oh, no," she returned, laughing at the idea. "We have signed contracts waiving any damages for injuries sustained while at work on the premises. We all have to do that, you know, because the business is hazardous at its best. On the other

hand, Mr. Goldstein has a physician and surgeon always within call, in case of accident, and the service is quite free to all the employees."

He nodded.

"I know. But the fact that you signed such a contract, under compulsion, would not prevent the court from awarding damages, if you sustained them while on duty."

"This hurt is nothing of importance," she said hastily. "In a day or two I shall be able to walk as well as ever."

Flo came running back with Maud's things. Aunt Jane followed, saying that if Maud was to go to the hotel she would accompany her and take care of her.

"I've examined the ankle," she said to young Jones, "and I assure you it is not a severe strain. But it is true that she will be better off in her own room, where she can rest quietly. So I will go with her."

"How about Miss Flo?" asked the boy.

"Flo is very self-reliant and will get along to-day very nicely without me," replied Mrs. Montrose.

Mr. Goldstein entered, frowning and still resenting the interference of this Mr. A. Jones of Sangoa. But he ventured no further protest nor did he speak until Maud, Flo and Aunt Jane had all left the room.

"You're not going, Mr. Jones?" he asked.

"Only to see Miss Stanton started for home. Then I'll come back and have a little talk with you."

"Thank you, sir."

CHAPTER XII - PICTURES, GIRLS AND NONSENSE

"Well, Aunt Jane," said Maud Stanton, when their car was rolling toward the hotel and the girl had related the remarkable interview in the office, "what do you think of Ajo now?"

"He is certainly an amazing young man," was the reply. "I cannot in any way figure out his connection with Goldstein, or his power over the man. The Continental Film Manufacturing Company is a great corporation, with headquarters in New York, and Mr. Goldstein is the authorized head and manager of the concern on the Pacific coast. I understand his salary is ten thousand a year. On the other hand, young Jones has only been in this country for a year, coming from an insignificant island somewhere in the South Seas, where he was born and reared. Much of the time since he arrived in America he has been an invalid. Aside from this meager information, no one seems to know anything about him."

"Putting the case that way makes it all the more remarkable," observed Maud. "A big, experienced, important man, cowed by a mere boy. When Goldstein first met this callow, sallow youth, he trembled before him. When the boy enters the office of the great film company he dictates to the manager, who meekly obeys him. Remember, too, that A. Jones, by his interference, has caused a direct loss to the company, which Goldstein will have to explain, as best he may, in his weekly report to the New York office. A more astonishing state of affairs could not be imagined, Aunt Jane!"

"The puzzle will solve itself presently," said the lady. "Abnormal conditions seldom last long."

Maud passed the day in bed, quietly reading a book. Her injury was really slight and with rest it mended rapidly. Patsy and Beth came in to see her and in the conversation that ensued the girls were told of the latest mystery surrounding A. Jones.

"It is surely queer!" admitted Miss Doyle, impressed and thoughtful. "Uncle John and Arthur were saying this noon, at lunch, that Ajo was a helpless sort of individual and easily influenced by others--as witness his caving in to me when I opposed his doctor's treatment. Arthur thinks he has come to this country to squander what little money his father left him and that his public career outside the limits of his little island will be brief. Yet according to your story the boy is no weakling but has power and knows how to use it."

"He surely laid down the law to Goldstein," said Maud.

"He is very young," remarked Beth, ignoring the fact that she was herself no older, "and perhaps that is why we attach so much importance to his actions. A grown-up man is seldom astonishing, however eccentric he may prove to be. In a boy we expect only boyishness, and young Jones has interested us because he is unique."

After a little the conversation drifted to motion pictures, for both Patsy and Beth were eager to learn all about the business details of film making, which Maud, by reason of her months of experience, was able to explain to them in a comprehensive manner. Flo came home toward evening, but had little more to tell them, as the day had passed very quietly at the "studio." Jones had remained closeted with the manager for a full hour, and it was remarked that after he had gone away Goldstein was somewhat subdued and performed his duties less aggressively than usual.

Maud's visitors now left her to dress for dinner, at which meal she was able to rejoin them, walking with a slight limp but otherwise recovered from her accident. To their surprise, young Jones appeared as they were entering the dining room and begged for a seat at their table. Uncle John at once ordered another place laid at the big round table, which accommodated the company of nine very nicely.

Ajo sat between Patsy and Maud and although he selected his dishes with some care he partook of all the courses from soup to dessert.

The morning interview with Goldstein was not mentioned. Ajo inquired about Maud's hurt but then changed the subject and conversed upon nearly everything but motion pictures. However, after they had repaired to the hotel lobby and were seated together in a cosy, informal group, Patsy broached a project very near to her heart.

"Beth and I," said she, "have decided to build a Children's Picture Theatre."

"Where?" asked Uncle John, rather startled by the proposition.

"Here, or in Los Angeles," was the reply.

"You see," explained Beth, "there is a crying need for a place where children may go and see pictures that appeal especially to them and are, at the same time, quite proper for them to witness. A great educational field is to be opened by this venture, and Patsy and I would enjoy the work of creating the first picture theatre, exclusively for children, ever established in America."

"You may say, 'in the world,'" added Arthur. "I like this idea of yours, girls, and I hope you will carry it out."

"Oh, they'll carry it out, all right," remarked Uncle John. "I've been expecting something of this sort, ever since we came here. My girls, Mr. Jones," he said, turning to the young man, "are always doing some quaint thing, or indulging in some queer enterprise, for they're a restless lot. Before Louise married, she was usually in these skirmishes with fate, but now--"

"Oh, I shall join Patsy and Beth, of course," asserted Louise. "It will make it easier for all, to divide the expense between us, and I am as much interested in pictures as they are."

"Perhaps," said Patsy musingly, "we might build two theatres, in different parts of the city. There are so many children to be amused. And we intend to make the admission price five cents."

"Have you any idea what it costs to build one of these picture theatres?" asked Arthur.

"We're not going to build one of 'these' theatres," retorted Patsy. "Many of the dens I've been in cost scarcely anything, being mere shelters. The city is strewn with a lot of miserable, stuffy theatres that no one can enjoy sitting in, even to see a good picture. We have talked this over and decided to erect a new style of building, roomy and sanitary, with cushioned seats and plenty of broad aisles. There are one or two of this class already in Los Angeles, but we want to make our children's theatres a little better than the best."

"And the expense?"

"Well, it will cost money, of course. But it will be a great delight to the children-- bless their little hearts!"

"This is really a business enterprise," added Beth gravely.

Uncle John chuckled with amusement.

"Have you figured out the profits?" he inquired.

"It really ought to pay, Uncle," declared Patsy, somewhat nettled by this flaccid reception of her pet scheme. "All the children will insist on being taken to a place like that, for we shall show just the pictures they love to see. And, allowing there is no money to be made from the venture, think of the joy we shall give to innumerable little ones!"

"Go ahead, my dears," said Uncle John, smiling approval. "And, if you girls find you haven't enough money to carry out your plans, come to me."

"Oh, thank you, Uncle!" exclaimed Beth. "But I feel sure we can manage the cost ourselves. We will build one of the theatres first, and if that is a success we will build others."

"But about those films, made especially for children," remarked Arthur. "Where will you get them?"

"Why, there are lots of firms making films," replied Patsy. "We can select from all that are made the ones most suitable for our purpose."

"I fear you cannot do that," said Mrs. Montrose, who had listened with wonder to this conversation. "There are three combinations, or 'trusts,' among the film makers, which are known as the Licensed, the Mutual and the Independents. If you purchase from one of these trusts, you cannot get films from the others, for that is their edict. Therefore you will have only about one-third of the films made to select from."

"I thought money would buy anything--in the way of merchandise," said Louise, half laughing and half indignant.

"Not from these film dictators," was the reply.

"They all make a few children's pictures," announced Maud Stanton. "Even the Continental turns out one occasionally. But there are not nearly enough, taken all together, to supply an exclusive children's theatre."

"Then we will have some made," declared Patsy. "We will order some fairy tales, such as the children like. They would be splendid in motion pictures."

"Some have already been made and exhibited," said Mrs. Montrose. "The various manufacturers have made films of the fairy tales of Hans Andersen, Frank Baum, Lewis Carroll and other well-known writers."

"And were they successful?"

"Quite so, I believe; but such films are seldom put out except at holiday time."

"I think, Beth," said Patsy to her cousin, in a businesslike tone, "that we must organize a company and make our own films. Then we can get exactly what we want."

"Oh, yes!" replied Beth, delighted with the suggestion. "And let us get Maud and Flo to act in our pictures. Won't it be exciting?"

"Pardon me, young ladies," said A. Jones, speaking for the first time since this subject had been broached. "Would it not be wise to consider the expense of making films, before you undertake it?"

Patsy looked at him inquiringly.

"Do you know what the things cost?" she asked.

"I've some idea," said he. "Feature films of fairy tales, such as you propose, cost at least two thousand dollars each to produce. You would need about three for each performance, and you will have to change your programmes at least once a week. That would mean an outlay of not less than six thousand dollars a week, which is doubtless more money than your five-cent theatre could take in."

This argument staggered the girls for a moment. Then Beth asked: "How do the ordinary theatres manage?"

"The ordinary theatre simply rents its pictures, paying about three hundred dollars a week for the service. There is a 'middleman,' called the 'Exchange,' whose business is to buy the films from the makers and rent them to the theatres. He pays a big price for a film, but is able to rent it to dozens of theatres, by turns, and by this method he not only gets back the money he has expended but makes a liberal profit."

"Well," said Patsy, not to be baffled, "we could sell several copies of our films to these middlemen, and so reduce the expense of making them for our use."

"The middleman won't buy them," asserted Jones. "He is the thrall of one or the other of the trusts, and buys only trust pictures."

"I see," said Uncle John, catching the idea; "it's a scheme to destroy competition."

"Exactly," replied young Jones.

"What does the Continental do, Maud?" asked Patsy.

"I don't know," answered the girl; "but perhaps Aunt Jane can tell you."

"I believe the Continental is a sort of trust within itself," explained Mrs. Montrose. "Since we have been connected with the company I have learned more or less of its methods. It employs a dozen or so producing companies and makes three or four pictures every week. The concern has its own Exchange, or middleman, who rents only Continental films to the theatres that patronize him."

"Well, we might do the same thing," proposed Patsy, who was loath to abandon her plan.

"You might, if you have the capital," assented Mrs. Montrose. "The Continental is an immense corporation, and I am told it has more than a million dollars invested."

"Two millions," said A. Jones.

The girls were silent a while, seriously considering this startling assertion. They had, between them, considerable money, but they realized they could not enter a field that required such an enormous investment as film making.

"I suppose," said Beth regretfully, "we shall have to give up making films."

"Then where are we to get the proper pictures for our theatre?" demanded Patsy.

"It is quite evident we can't get them," said Louise. "Therefore we may be obliged to abandon the theatre proposition."

Another silence, still more grave. Uncle John was discreet enough to say nothing. The Stantons and Mrs. Montrose felt it was not their affair. Arthur Weldon was slyly enjoying the chagrin visible upon the faces of Mr. Merrick's three pretty nieces.

As for A. Jones, he was industriously figuring upon the back of an envelope with a stubby bit of pencil.

CHAPTER XIII - A FOOLISH BOY

It was the youthful Sangoan who first broke the silence. Glancing at the figures he had made he said:

"It is estimated that if twenty picture theatres use any one film--copies of it, of course--that film will pay for its cost of making. Therefore, if you build twenty children's theatres, instead of the one or two you originally proposed, you would be able to manufacture your own films and they would be no expense to you."

They gazed at him in bewilderment.

"That is all simple enough!" laughed Arthur. "Twenty picture theatres at twenty thousand dollars each--a low estimate, my dears, for such as you require--would mean an investment of four hundred thousand dollars. A film factory, with several producing companies to keep it busy, and all the necessary paraphernalia of costumes and properties, would mean a million or so more. Say a million and a half, all told. Why, it's a mere bagatelle!"

"Arthur!" Severely, from Louise.

"I advise you girls to economize in other ways and devote your resources to this business, which might pay you--and might not," he continued, oblivious to stony glares.

"Really, Mr. Jones," said Beth, pouting, "we were not joking, but in real earnest."

"Have I questioned it, Miss De Graf?"

"Mr. Jones was merely trying to show you how--er--er--how impractical your idea was," explained Uncle John mildly.

"No; I am in earnest, too," said the boy. "To prove it, I will agree to establish a plant and make the pictures, if the young ladies will build the twenty theatres to show them in."

Here was another suggestion of a bewildering nature. Extravagant as the offer seemed, the boy was very serious. He blushed a little as he observed Mr. Merrick eyeing him earnestly, and continued in an embarrassed, halting way: "I-I assure you, sir, that I am able to fulfill my part of the agreement. Also I would like to do it. It would serve to interest me and keep me occupied in ways that are not wholly selfish. My--my other business does not demand my personal attention, you see."

To hear this weak, sickly youth speak of investing a million dollars in a doubtful enterprise, in spite of the fact that he lived on a far-away island and was a practical stranger in America, set them all to speculating anew in regard to his history and condition in life. Seeing that the boy had himself made an opening for a logical query, Uncle John asked:

"Do you mind telling us what this other business is, to which you refer?"

A. Jones moved uneasily in his chair. Then he glanced quickly around the circle and found every eye regarding him with eager curiosity. He blushed again, a deep red this time, but an instant later straightened up and spoke in a tone of sudden resolve.

"Most people dislike to speak of themselves," he said, "and I am no exception. But you, who have kindly received me as a friend, after having generously saved me from an untimely death, have surely the right to know something about me--if, indeed, the subject interests you."

"It is but natural that we should feel an interest in you, Mr. Jones," replied Mr. Merrick; "yet I assure you we have no desire to pry into your personal affairs. You have already volunteered a general statement of your antecedents and the object of your visit to America, and that, I assure you, will suffice us. Pardon me for asking an impertinent question."

The boy seemed perplexed, now.

"I did not consider it impertinent, sir. I made a business proposal to your nieces," he said, "and before they could accept such a proposal they would be entitled to know something of my financial standing."

For a green, inexperienced youth, he spoke with rare acumen, thought Mr. Merrick; but the old gentleman had now determined to shield the boy from a forced declaration of his finances, so he said:

"My nieces can hardly afford to accept your proposition. They are really able to build one or two theatres without inconveniencing themselves, but twenty would be beyond their means. You, of course, understand they were not seeking an investment, but trying, with all their hearts, to benefit the children. I thoroughly approve their original idea, but if it requires twenty picture theatres to render it practical, they will abandon the notion at once."

Jones nodded absently, his eyes half closed in thought. After a brief pause he replied:

"I hate to see this idea abandoned at the very moment of its birth. It's a good idea, and in no way impractical, in my opinion. So permit me to make another proposition. I will build the twenty theatres myself, and furnish the films for

them, provided the young ladies will agree to assume the entire management of them when they are completed."

Dead silence followed this speech. The girls did some rapid-fire mental calculations and realized that this young man was proposing to invest something like fourteen hundred thousand dollars, in order that they might carry out their philanthropic conception. Why should he do this, even if he could afford it?

Both Mr. Merrick and Arthur Weldon were staring stolidly at the floor. Their attitudes expressed, for the first time, doubt--if not positive unbelief. As men of considerable financial experience, they regarded the young islander's proposition as an impossible one.

Jones noted this blank reception of his offer and glanced appealingly at Patsy. It was an uncomfortable moment for the girl and to avoid meeting his eyes she looked away, across the lobby. A few paces distant stood a man who leaned against a table and held a newspaper before his face. Patsy knew, however, that he was not reading. A pair of dark, glistening eyes peered over the top of the paper and were steadfastly fixed upon the unconscious features of young Jones.

Something in the attitude of the stranger, whom she had never seen before, something in the rigid pose, the intent gaze--indicating both alertness and repression--riveted the girl's attention at once and gave her a distinct shock of uneasiness.

"I wish," said the boy, in his quiet, firm way, yet with much deference in his manner and tone, "that you young ladies would consider my offer seriously, and take proper time to reach a decision. I am absolutely in earnest. I want to join you in your attempt to give pleasure to children, and I am willing and--and able--to furnish the funds required. Without your cooperation, however, I could do nothing, and my health is such that I wish to leave the management of the theatres entirely in your hands, as well as all the details of their construction."

"We will consider it, of course, Mr. Jones," answered Beth gravely. "We are a little startled just now, as you see; but when we grow accustomed to the immensity of the scheme--our baby, which you have transformed into a giant--we shall be able to consider it calmly and critically, and decide if we are competent to undertake the management of so many theatres."

"Thank you. Then, I think, I will excuse myself for this evening and return to my room. I'm improving famously, under Dr. Doyle's instructions, but am not yet a rugged example of health."

Patsy took his hand at parting, as did the others, but her attention was divided between Ajo and the strange man who had never for a moment ceased watching him. Not once did the dark eyes waver, but followed each motion of the boy as he

sauntered to the desk, got his key from the clerk, and then proceeded to his room, turning up one of the corridors on the main floor.

The stranger now laid his newspaper on the table and disclosed his entire face for the first time. A middle-aged man, he seemed to be, with iron-gray hair and a smoothly shaven, rather handsome face. From his dress he appeared to be a prosperous business man and it was evident that he was a guest of the hotel, for he wandered through the lobby--in which many other guests were grouped, some chatting and others playing "bridge"--and presently disappeared down the corridor traversed by young Jones.

Patsy drew a deep breath, but said nothing to the others, who, when relieved of the boy's presence, began to discuss volubly his singular proposal.

"The fellow is crazy," commented Arthur. "Twenty picture theatres, with a film factory to supply them, is a big order even for a multi-millionaire--and I can't imagine this boy coming under that head."

"He seemed in earnest," said Maud, musingly. "What do you think, Aunt Jane?"

"I am greatly perplexed," admitted Mrs. Montrose. "Had I not known of the conquest of Goldstein by this boy, who issued orders which the manager of the Continental meekly obeyed, I would have laughed at his proposition. As it is, I'm afraid to state that he won't carry out his plan to the letter of the agreement."

"Would it not be a rash investment, ma'am?" inquired Uncle John.

"Frankly, I do not know. While all the film makers evade any attempt to discover how prosperous--financially--they are, we know that without exception they have grown very wealthy. I am wondering if this young Jones is not one of the owners of the Continental--a large stockholder, perhaps. If so, that not only accounts for his influence with Goldstein, but it proves him able to finance this remarkable enterprise. He doubtless knows what he is undertaking, for his figures, while not accurate, were logical."

"Of course!" cried Patsy. "That explains everything."

"Still," said Uncle John cautiously, "this is merely surmise on our part, and before accepting it we must reconcile it with the incongruities in the case. It is possible that the elder Jones owned an interest in the Continental and bequeathed it to his son. But is it probable? Remember, he was an islander, and a recluse."

"More likely," said Beth, "Ajo's father left him a great fortune, which the boy invested in the Continental stock."

"I have been told," remarked Aunt Jane thoughtfully, "that Continental stock cannot be bought at any price. It pays such enormous dividends that no owner will dispose of it."

"The whole thing is perplexing in the extreme," declared Arthur. "The boy tells a story that at first seems frank and straightforward, yet his statements do not dovetail, so to speak."

"I think he is holding something back," said Beth; "something that would explain all the discrepancies in his story. You were wrong, Uncle John, not to let him speak when he offered to tell you all."

"There was something in his manner that made me revolt from forcing his confidence," was the reply.

"There was something in his manner that made me think he was about to concoct a story that would satisfy our curiosity," said Louise with a shrug.

Uncle John looked around the circle of faces.

"You are not questioning the young fellow's sincerity, I hope?" said he.

"I don't, for a single second!" asserted Patsy, stoutly. "He may have a queer history, and he may not have told us all of it, but Ajo is honest. I'll vouch for him!"

"So will I, my dear," said Uncle John.

"That is more than I can do, just at present," Arthur frankly stated. "My opinion is that his preposterous offer is mere bluff. If you accepted it, you would find him unable to do his part."

"Then what is his object?" asked Maud.

"I can't figure it out, as yet. He might pose as a millionaire and a generous friend and philanthropist for some time, before the truth was discovered, and during that time he could carry out any secret plans he had in mind. The boy is more shrewd than he appears to be. We, by chance saved his life, and at once he attached himself to us like a barnacle, and we can't shake him off."

"We don't want to," said Patsy.

"My explanation is that he has fallen in love with one of us girls," suggested Flo, with a mischievous glance at her sister. "I wonder if it's me?"

"It is more likely," said Louise, "that he has discovered Uncle John to be a very--prosperous--man."

"Nonsense, my dear!" exclaimed that gentleman, evidently irritated by the insinuation. "Don't pick the boy to pieces. Give him a chance. So far he has asked nothing from us, but offers everything. He's a grateful fellow and is anxious to help you girls carry out your ambitious plans. That is how I read him, and I think it is absurd to prejudge him in the way you are doing."

The party broke up, the Stantons and Weldons going to their rooms. Beth also rose.

"Are you coming to bed, Patsy?" she inquired.

"Not just now," her cousin replied. "Between us, we've rubbed Uncle John's fur the wrong way and he won't get composed until he has smoked his good-night cigar. I'll sit with him in this corner and keep him company."

So the little man and his favorite niece were left together, and he did not seem in the least ruffled as he lit his cigar and settled down in a big chair, with Patsy beside him, to enjoy it.

CHAPTER XIV - ISIDORE LE DRIEUX

Perhaps the cigar was half gone when Patsy gave a sudden start and squeezed Uncle John's hand, which she had been holding in both her own.

"What is it, my dear?"

"The man I told you of. There he is, just across the lobby. The man with the gray clothes and gray hair."

"Oh, yes; the one lighting a cigar."

"Precisely."

Uncle John gazed across the lobby reflectively. The stranger's eyes roved carelessly around the big room and then he moved with deliberate steps toward their corner. He passed several vacant chairs and settees on his way and finally paused before a lounging-chair not six feet distant from the one occupied by Mr. Merrick.

"Pardon me; is this seat engaged, sir?" he asked.

"No," replied Uncle John, not very graciously, for it was a deliberate intrusion.

The stranger sat down and for a time smoked his cigar in silence. He was so near them that Patsy forbore any conversation, knowing he would overhear it.

Suddenly the man turned squarely in their direction and addressed them.

"I hope you will pardon me, Mr. Merrick, if I venture to ask a question," said he.

"Well, sir?"

"I saw you talking with Mr. Jones this evening--A. Jones, you know, who says he came from Sangoa."

"Didn't he?" demanded the old gentleman.

The stranger smiled.

"Perhaps; once on a time; allowing such a place exists. But his last journey was here from Austria."

"Indeed!"

Mr. Merrick and Patsy were both staring at the man incredulously.

"I am quite sure of that statement, sir; but I cannot prove it, as yet."

"Ah! I thought not."

Patsy had just told her uncle how she had detected this man stealthily watching Jones, and how he had followed the boy when he retired to his room. The present interview had, they both knew, something to do with this singular action. Therefore Mr. Merrick restrained his indignation at the stranger's pointed questioning. He realized quite well that the man had come to their corner determined to catechise them and gain what information he could. Patsy realized this, too. So, being forewarned, they hoped to learn his object without granting him the satisfaction of "pumping" them.

"I suppose you are friends of this Mr. A. Jones," was his next remark.

"We are acquaintances," said Mr. Merrick.

"Has he ever mentioned his adventures in Austria to you?"

"Are you a friend of Mr. Jones?" demanded uncle John.

"I am not even an acquaintance," said the man, smiling. "But I am interested in him, through a friend of mine who met him abroad. Permit me to introduce myself, sir."

He handed them a card which read:

"ISADORE LE DRIEUX Importer of Pearls and Precious Stones 36
Maiden Lane, New York City."

"I have connections abroad, in nearly all countries," continued the man, "and it is through some of them that I have knowledge of this young fellow who has taken the name of A. Jones. In fact, I have a portrait of the lad, taken in Paris, which I will show you."

He searched in his pocket and produced an envelope from which he carefully removed a photograph, which he handed to Uncle John. Patsy examined it, too, with a start of surprise. The thin features, the large serious eyes, even the closely set lips were indeed those of A. Jones. But in the picture he wore a small mustache.

"It can't be our A. Jones," murmured Patsy. "This one is older."

"That is on account of the mustache," remarked Le Drieux, who was closely watching their faces. "This portrait was taken more than a year ago."

"Oh; but he was in Sangoa then," protested Patsy, who was really bewildered by the striking resemblance.

The stranger smiled indulgently.

"As a matter of fact, there is no Sangoa," said he; "so we may doubt the young man's assertion that he was ever there."

"Why are you interested in him?" inquired Mr. Merrick.

"A natural question," said Le Drieux, after a moment of hesitation. "I know you well by reputation, Mr. Merrick, and believe I am justified in speaking frankly to you and your niece, provided you regard my statements as strictly confidential. A year ago I received notice from my friend in Austria that the young man had gone to America and he was anxious I should meet him. At the time I was too busy with my own affairs to look him up, but I recently came to California for a rest, and noticed the strong resemblance between the boy, A. Jones, and the portrait sent me. So I hunted up this picture and compared the two. In my judgment they are one and the same. What do you think, sir?"

"I believe there is a resemblance," answered Uncle John, turning the card over. "But here is a name on the back of the photograph: 'Jack Andrews.'"

"Yes; this is Jack Andrews," said Le Drieux, nodding. "Have you ever heard the name before?"

"Never."

"Well, Andrews is noted throughout Europe, and it is but natural he should desire to escape his notoriety by assuming another name out here. Do you note the similarity of the initials? 'J.A.' stand for Jack Andrews. Reverse them and 'A.J.' stand for A. Jones. By the way, what does he claim the 'A' means? Is it Andrew?"

"It means nothing at all," said Patsy. "He told us so."

"I see. You caught him unprepared. That isn't like Jack. He is always on guard."

Both Patsy and Uncle John were by this time sorely perplexed. They had a feeling common to both of them, that the subject of this portrait and A. Jones were two separate and distinct persons; yet the resemblance could not be denied, if they were indeed the same, young Jones had deliberately lied to them, and recalling his various statements and the manner in which they had been made, they promptly acquitted the boy of the charge of falsehood.

"For what was Jack Andrews noted throughout Europe?" inquired Mr. Merrick, after silently considering these things.

"Well, he was a highflier, for one thing," answered Le Drieux. "He was known as a thorough 'sport' and, I am told, a clever gambler. He had a faculty of making

friends, even among the nobility. The gilded youth of London, Paris and Vienna cultivated his acquaintance, and through them he managed to get into very good society. He was a guest at the splendid villa of Countess Ahmberg, near Vienna, when her magnificent collection of pearls disappeared. You remember that loss, and the excitement it caused, do you not?"

"No, sir; I have never before heard of the Countess of Ahmberg or her pearls."

"Well, the story filled the newspapers for a couple of weeks. The collection embraced the rarest and most valuable pearls known to exist."

"And you accuse this man, Andrews, of stealing them?" asked Uncle John, tapping with his finger the portrait he still held.

"By no means, sir; by no means!" cried Le Drieux hastily. "In fact, he was one of the few guests at the villa to whom no suspicion attached. From the moment the casket of pearls was last seen by the countess until their loss was discovered, every moment of Andrews' time was accounted for. His alibi was perfect and he was quite prominent in the unsuccessful quest of the thief."

"The pearls were not recovered, then?"

"No. The whole affair is still a mystery. My friend in Vienna, a pearl merchant like myself, assisted Andrews in his endeavor to discover the thief and, being much impressed by the young man's personality, sent me this photograph, asking me to meet him, as I have told you, when he reached America."

"Is his home in this country?"

"New York knows him, but knows nothing of his family or his history. He is popular there, spending money freely and bearing the reputation of an all-around good fellow. On his arrival there, a year ago, he led a gay life for a few days and then suddenly disappeared. No one knew what had become of him. When I found him here, under the name of A. Jones, the disappearance was solved."

"I think," said Uncle John, "you are laboring under a serious, if somewhat natural, mistake. The subject of this picture is like A. Jones, indeed, but he is older and his expression more--more--"

"Blase and sophisticated," said Patsy.

"Thank you, my dear; I am no dictionary, and if those are real words they may convey my meaning. I feel quite sure, Mr. Le Drieux, that the story of Andrews can not be the story of young Jones."

Le Drieux took the picture and replaced it in his pocket.

"To err is human," said he, "and I will admit the possibility of my being mistaken in my man. But you will admit the resemblance?"

"Yes. They might be brothers. But young Jones has said he has no brothers, and I believe him."

Le Drieux sat in silence for a few minutes. Then he said:

"I appealed to you, Mr. Merrick, because I was not thoroughly satisfied, in my own mind, of my conclusions. You have added to my doubts, I must confess, yet I cannot abandon the idea that the two men are one and the same. As my suspicion is only shared by you and your niece, in confidence, I shall devote myself for a few days to studying young Jones and observing his actions. In that way I may get a clue that will set all doubt at rest."

"We will introduce you to him," said Patsy. "and then you may question him as much as you like."

"Oh, no; I prefer not to make his acquaintance until I am quite sure," was the reply. "If he is not Jack Andrews he would be likely to resent the insinuation that he is here trading under a false name. Good night, Mr. Merrick. Good night, Miss Doyle. I thank you for your courteous consideration."

He had risen, and now bowed and walked away.

"Well," said Patsy. "what was he after? And did he learn anything from us?"

"He did most of the talking himself," replied Uncle John, looking after Le Drieux with a puzzled expression. "Of course he is not a jewel merchant."

"No," said Patsy, "he's a detective, and I'll bet a toothpick to a match that he's on the wrong scent."

"He surely is. Unfortunately, we cannot warn Ajo against him."

"It isn't necessary, Uncle. Why, the whole thing is absurd. Our boy is not a gambler or roysterer, nor do I think he has ever been in Europe. Mr. Le Drieux will have to guess again!"

CHAPTER XV - A FEW PEARLS

The next morning Patsy, Beth and Louise met in earnest conference over the important proposition made them by young Jones, and although Uncle John and Arthur Weldon were both present the men took no part in the discussion.

"Some doubt has been expressed," said Beth judicially, "that Ajo is really able to finance this big venture. But he says he is, and that he will carry it through to the end, so I propose we let him do it."

"Why not?" asked Louise. "If he succeeds, it will be glorious. If he fails, we will suffer in no way except through disappointment."

"Well, shall we accept this offer, girls?"

"First," said Louise, "let us consider what we will have to do, on our part, when the twenty theatres are built and the film factory is in operation."

"We are to be the general managers," returned Patsy. "We must select the subjects, or plots, for the pictures, and order them made under our direction. Then we must see that all of our theatres present them in a proper manner, and we must invite children to come and see the shows. I guess that's all."

"That will be enough to keep us busy, I'm sure," said Beth. "But we will gladly undertake it, and I am sure we shall prove good managers, as soon as we get acquainted with the details of the business."

"It will give us the sort of employment we like," Patsy assured them. "Our first duty will be to plan these theatres for children, and make them as cosy and comfortable as possible, regardless of expense. Ajo will pay the bills, and when all the buildings are ready we will set to work in earnest."

So, when A. Jones appeared he was told that the girls would gladly accept his proposition. The young man seemed greatly pleased by this verdict. He appeared to be much better and stronger to-day and he entered eagerly into a discussion of the plans in detail. Together they made a list of a string of twenty theatres, to be built in towns reaching from Santa Barbara on the north to San Diego in the south. The film factory was to be located in the San Fernando Valley, just north of Hollywood.

This consumed the entire forenoon, and after lunch they met a prominent real estate man whom Jones had summoned to the hotel. This gentleman was given a copy of the list of locations and instructed to purchase in each town the best site

that could be secured for a motion picture theatre. This big order made the real estate man open his eyes in surprise.

"Do you wish me to secure options, or to purchase the land outright?" he asked.

"Be sure of your locations and then close the deals at once," replied Jones. "We do not wish to waste time in useless dickering, and a location in the heart of each town, perhaps on the main street, is more important than the price. You will, of course, protect me from robbery to the best of your ability; but buy, even if the price is exorbitant. I will this afternoon place a hundred thousand dollars to your credit in the bank, with which to make advance payments, and when you notify me how much more is required I will forward my checks at once."

"That is satisfactory, sir. I will do the best I can to guard your interests," said the man.

When he had gone the girls accompanied Ajo in a motorcar to Los Angeles, to consult an architect. They visited several offices before the boy, who seemed to estimate men at a glance, found one that satisfied him. The girls explained with care to the architect their idea of a luxurious picture theatre for children, and when he had grasped their conception, which he did with enthusiasm, he suggested several improvements on their immature plans and promised to have complete drawings ready to submit to them in a few days.

From the architect's office they drove to the German-American Bank, where Ajo gave his check for a hundred thousand dollars, to be placed to the credit of Mr. Wilcox, the real estate agent. The deference shown him by the cashier seemed to indicate that this big check was not the extent of A. Jones' credit there, by any means.

As they drove back to Hollywood, Patsy could not help eyeing this youthful capitalist with wonder. During this day of exciting business deals the boy had behaved admirably, and there was no longer a shadow of doubt in the minds of any of Uncle John's nieces that he was both able and anxious to carry out his part of the agreement.

Patsy almost giggled outright as she thought of Le Drieux and his ridiculous suspicions. One would have to steal a good many pearls in order to acquire a fortune to match that of the Sangoan.

He was speaking of Sangoa now, in answer to a question of Beth's.

"Yes, indeed," said he, "Sangoa is very beautiful, and the climate is even more mild than that of your Southern California. The north coast is a high bluff, on which is a splendid forest of rosewood and mahogany. My father would never

allow any of these magnificent trees to be cut, except a few that were used in building our house."

"But how do your people live? What is the principal industry of your islanders?" asked Beth.

"My people are--fishermen," he said, and then the automobile drew up before the hotel entrance and the conversation ended.

It was on the following afternoon, as they all met in the hotel lobby after lunch, that a messenger handed young Jones a neat parcel, for which a receipt was demanded. Ajo held the parcel in his hand a while, listening to the chatter of the girls, who were earnestly discussing plans for the new picture enterprise. Then very quietly and unobtrusively he unwrapped the package and laid upon the table beside him several small boxes bearing the name of a prominent jeweler.

"I hope," said he, taking advantage of a pause caused by the girls observing this action, and growing visibly confused by their involuntary stares of curiosity; "I--I hope that you, my new friends, will pardon a liberty I have taken. I wanted to--to present those who were instrumental in saving my life with--with a--a slight token of my gratitude--a sort of--of--memento of a brave and generous act that gave me back the life I had carelessly jeopardized. No," as he saw surprise and protest written on their faces, "don't refuse me this pleasure, I implore you! The little--eh--eh--mementos are from my own Island of Sangoa, with the necessary mountings by a Los Angeles jeweler, and--please accept them!"

As he spoke he handed to each of the girls a box, afterward giving one to Uncle John and another to Arthur. There remained upon the table three others. He penciled a name upon the bottom of each and then handed them to Patsy, saying:

"Will you kindly present these, with my compliments, to the Misses Stanton, and to their aunt, when they return this evening? Thank you!"

And then, before they could recover from their astonishment, he turned abruptly and fled to his room.

The girls stared at one another a moment and then began laughing. Arthur seemed crestfallen, while Uncle John handled his small box as gingerly as if he suspected it contained an explosive.

"How ridiculous!" cried Patsy, her blue eyes dancing. "And did you notice how scared poor Ajo was, and how he skipped as fearfully as though he had committed some crime? But I'm sure the poor boy meant well. Let's open our boxes, girls, and see what foolishness Ajo has been up to."

Slipping off the cover of her box, Beth uttered a low cry of amazement and admiration. Then she held up a dainty lavalliere, with a pendant containing a

superb pearl. Louise had the mate to this, but the one Patsy found had a pearl of immense size, its color being an exquisite shade of pink, such as is rarely seen. Arthur displayed a ring set with a splendid white pearl, while Uncle John's box contained a stick pin set with a huge black pearl of remarkable luster. Indeed, they saw at a glance that the size and beauty of all these pearls were very uncommon, and while the others expressed their enthusiastic delight, the faces of Mr. Merrick and Patsy Doyle were solemn and perplexed. They stared at the pearls with feelings of dismay, rather than joy, and chancing to meet one another's eyes they quickly dropped their gaze to avoid exchanging the ugly suspicion that had forced itself upon their minds.

With a sudden thought Patsy raised her head to cast a searching glance around the lobby, for although their party was seated in an alcove they were visible to all in the big room of which it formed a part. Yes, Mr. Isidore Le Drieux was standing near them, as she had feared, and the slight sneer upon his lips proved that he had observed the transfer of the pearls.

So the girl promptly clasped her lavalliere around her neck and openly displayed it, as a proud defiance, if not a direct challenge, to that detestable sneer.

Arthur, admiring his ring in spite of his chagrin at receiving such a gift from a comparative stranger, placed the token on his finger.

"It is a beauty, indeed," said he, "but I don't think we ought to accept such valuable gifts from this boy."

"I do not see why," returned his wife Louise. "I think these pretty tributes for saving Mr. Jones' life are very appropriate. Of course neither Beth nor I had anything to do with that affair, but we are included in the distribution because it would be more embarrassing to leave us out of it."

"And the pearls came from Sangoa," added Beth, "so all these precious gifts have cost Ajo nothing, except for their settings."

"If Sangoa can furnish many such pearls as these," remarked Arthur, reflectively, "the island ought to be famous, instead of unknown. Their size and beauty render the gems priceless."

"Well," said Patsy soberly, "we know now where A. Jones got his money, which is so plentiful that he can build any number of film factories and picture theatres. Sangoa must have wonderful pearl fisheries--don't you remember, girls, that he told us his people were fishermen?--for each of these specimens is worth a small fortune. Mine, especially, is the largest and finest pearl I have ever seen."

"I beg your pardon!" sternly exclaimed Uncle John, as he whirled swiftly around. "Can I do anything for you, sir?"

For Mr. Le Drieux had stealthily advanced to the alcove and was glaring at the display of pearls and making notes in a small book.

He bowed, without apparent resentment, as he answered Mr. Merrick: "Thank you, sir; you have already served me admirably. Pardon my intrusion."

Then he closed the book, slipped it into his pocket and with another low bow walked away.

"What rank impertinence!" cried Arthur, staring after him. "Some newspaper reporter, I suppose. Do you know him, Uncle John?"

"He forced an introduction, a few evenings ago. It is a pearl merchant from New York, named Le Drieux, so I suppose his curiosity is but natural."

"Shall we keep our pearls, Uncle?" asked Beth.

"I shall keep mine," replied the little man, who never wore any ornament of jewelry. "It was generous and thoughtful in young Jones to present these things and we ought not offend him by refusing his 'mementos,' as he calls them."

Perhaps all the nieces were relieved to hear this verdict, for already they loved their beautiful gifts. That evening the Stanton girls and their Aunt Jane received their parcels, being fully as much surprised as the others had been, and their boxes also contained pearls. Flo and Maud had lavallieres, the latter receiving one as large and beautiful as that of Patsy Doyle, while Mrs. Montrose found a brooch set with numerous smaller pearls.

Patsy urged them all to wear the ornaments to dinner that evening, which they did, and although Jones was not there to observe the effect of the splendid pearls, Mr. Le Drieux was at his place in the dining room and made more notes in his little book.

That was exactly what Patsy wanted. "I can't stand the suspense of this thing," she whispered to Uncle John, "and if that man wants any information about these pearls I propose we give it to him. In that way he will soon discover he is wrong in suspecting the identity of Jack Andrews and A. Jones."

Mr. Merrick nodded absently and went to his corner for a smoke. Arthur soon after joined him, while Aunt Jane took her bevy of girls to another part of the loge.

"Le Drieux will be here presently," said Uncle John to young Weldon.

"Oh, the fellow with the book. Why, sir?"

"He's a detective, I think. Anyhow, he is shadowing Jones, whom he suspects is a thief."

He then told Arthur frankly of his former conversation with Le Drieux, and of the puzzling photograph.

"It really resembles the boy," he admitted, with a frown of perplexity, "yet at the same time I realized the whole thing was absurd. Neither Patsy nor I can believe that Jones is the man who robbed an Austrian countess. It's preposterous! And let me say right now, Arthur, that I'm going to stand by this young fellow, with all my influence, in case those hounds try to make him trouble."

Arthur did not reply at once. He puffed his cigar silently while he revolved the startling accusation in his mind.

"Both you and Patsy are staunch friends," he observed, after a while, "and I have noticed that your intuition as regards character is seldom at fault. But I advise you, in this instance, not to be hasty, for--"

"I know; you are going to refer to those pearls."

"Naturally. If I don't, Le Drieux will, as you have yourself prophesied. Pearls--especially such pearls as these--are rare and easy to recognize. The world does not contain many black-pearls, for instance, such as that you are wearing. An expert--a man with a photograph that strongly resembles young Jones--is tracing some stolen pearls of great value--a collection, I think you said. We find Jones, a man seemingly unknown here, giving away a number of wonderful pearls that are worthy a place in any collection. Admit it is curious, Uncle John. It may be all a coincidence, of course; but how do you account for it, sir?"

"Jones has an island in the South Seas, a locality where most of the world's famous pearls have been found."

"Sangoa?"

"Yes."

"It is not on any map. This man, Le Drieux, positively stated that there is no such island, did he not?"

Uncle John rubbed his chin, a gesture that showed he was disturbed.

"He was not positive. He said he thought there was no such island."

"Well, sir?"

"If Jones could lie about his island, he would be capable of the theft of those pearls," admitted Mr. Merrick reluctantly.

"That is conclusive, sir."

"But he isn't capable of the theft. Le Drieux states that Jack Andrews is a society swell, an all-around confidence man, and a gambler. Jones is a diffident and retiring, but a very manly young fellow, who loves quiet and seems to have no bad habits. You can't connect the two in any possible way."

Again Arthur took time to consider.

"I have no desire to suspect Jones unjustly," he said. "In fact, I have been inclined to like the fellow. And yet--his quaint stories and his foolish expenditures have made me suspicious from the first. You have scarcely done justice to his character in your description, sir. To us he appears diffident, retiring, and rather weak, in a way, while in his intercourse with Goldstein he shows a mailed fist. He can be hard as nails, on occasion, as we know, and at times he displays a surprising knowledge of the world and its ways--for one who has been brought up on an out-of-the-way island. What do we know about him, anyway? He tells a tale no one can disprove, for the South Seas are full of small islands, some of which are probably unrecorded on the charts. All this might possibly be explained by remembering that a man like Jack Andrews is undoubtedly a clever actor."

"Exactly!" said a jubilant voice behind them, and Mr. Isidore Le Drieux stepped forward and calmly drew up a chair, in which he seated himself. "You will pardon me, gentlemen, for eavesdropping, but I was curious to know what you thought of this remarkable young man who calls himself 'A. Jones.'"

Arthur faced the intruder with a frown. He objected to being startled in this manner. "You are a detective?" he asked.

"Oh, scarcely that, sir," Le Drieux replied in a deprecating way. "My printed card indicates that I am a merchant, but in truth I am a special agent, employed by the largest pearl and gem dealers in the world, a firm with branches in every large European and American city. My name is Le Drieux, sir, at your service," and with a flourish he presented his card.

The young rancher preferred to study the man's face.

"I am a sort of messenger," he continued, placidly. "When valuable consignments of jewels are to be delivered, I am the carrier instead of the express companies. The method is safer. In twenty-six years of this work I have never lost a single jewel."

"One firm employs you exclusively, then?"

"One firm. But it has many branches."

"It is a trust?"

"Oh, no; we have many competitors; but none very important. Our closest rival, for instance, has headquarters on this very coast--in San Francisco--but spreads, as we do, over the civilized world. Yet Jephson's--that's the firm--do not claim to equal our business. They deal mostly in pearls."

"Pearls, eh?" said Arthur, musingly. "Then it was your firm that lost the valuable collection of pearls you mentioned to Mr. Merrick?"

"No. They were the property of Countess Ahmberg, of Vienna. But we had sold many of the finest specimens to the countess and have records of their weight, size, shape and color. The one you are now wearing, sir," pointing to Uncle John's scarf pin, "is one of the best black pearls ever discovered. It was found at Tremloe in 1883 and was originally purchased by our firm. In 1887 I took it to Tiffany, who sold it to Prince Godesky, of Warsaw. I carried it to him, with other valuable purchases, and after his death it was again resold to our firm. It was in October, 1904, that I again became the bearer of the pearl, delivering it safely to Countess Ahmberg at her villa. It was stolen from her, together with 188 other rare pearls, valued at a half million dollars, a little over a year ago."

"This pearl, sir," said Uncle John stiffly, "is not the one you refer to. It was found on the shores of the island of Sangoa, and you have never seen it before."

Le Drieux smiled sweetly as he brushed the ashes from his cigar.

"I am seldom mistaken in a pearl, especially one that I have handled," said he. "Moreover, a good pearl becomes historic, and it is my business to know the history of each and every one in existence."

"Even those owned by Jephson's?" asked Arthur.

"Yes; unless they were acquired lately. I have spoken in this manner in order that you may understand the statements I am about to make, and I beg you to listen carefully: Three daring pearl robberies have taken place within the past two years. The first was a collection scarcely inferior to that of the Countess Ahmberg. A bank messenger was carrying it through the streets of London one evening, to be delivered to Lady Grandison, when he was stabbed to the heart and the gems stolen. Singularly enough, Jack Andrews was passing by and found the dying messenger. He called for the police, but when they arrived the messenger had expired. The fate of the pearls has always remained a mystery, although a large reward has been offered for their recovery."

"Oh; a reward."

"Naturally, sir. Four months later Princess Lemoine lost her wonderful pearl necklace while sitting in a box at the Grand Opera in Paris. This was one of the cleverest thefts that ever baffled the police, for the necklace was never recovered."

We know, however, that Jack Andrews occupied the box next to that of the princess. A coincidence--perhaps. We now come to the robbery of the Countess Ahmberg, the third on the list. Jack Andrews was a guest at her house, as I have explained to you. No blame has ever attached to this youthful adventurer, yet my firm, always interested in the pearls they have sold, advised me to keep an eye on him when he returned to America. I did so.

"Now, Mr. Merrick, I will add to the tale I told you the other night. Andrews behaved very well for a few weeks after he landed at New York; then he disposed of seven fine pearls and--disappeared. They were not notable pearls, especially, but two of them I was able to trace to the necklace of Princess Lemoine. I cabled my firm. They called attention to the various rewards offered and urged me to follow Andrews. That was impossible; he had left no clue. But chance favored me. Coming here to Los Angeles on business, I suddenly ran across my quarry: Jack Andrews. He has changed a bit. The mustache is gone, he is in poor health, and I am told he was nearly drowned in the ocean the other day. So at first I was not sure of my man. I registered at this hotel and watched him carefully. Sometimes I became positive he was Andrews; at other times I doubted. But when he began distributing pearls to you, his new friends, all doubt vanished. There, gentlemen, is my story in a nutshell. What do you think of it?"

Both Mr. Merrick and young Weldon had listened with rapt interest, but their interpretation of the tale, which amounted to a positive accusation of A. Jones, showed the difference in the two men's natures.

"I think you are on the wrong trail, sir," answered Mr. Merrick. "Doubtless you have been misled by a casual resemblance, coupled with the fact that Andrews is suspected of stealing pearls and Jones is known to possess pearls--the pearls being of rare worth in both cases. Still, you are wrong. For instance, if you have the weight and measurement of the Tremloe black pearl, you will find they do not fit the pearl I am now wearing."

Le Drieux smiled genially.

"It is unnecessary to make the test, sir," he replied. "The pearl Andrews gave to Miss Doyle is as unmistakable as your own. But I am curious to hear your opinion, Mr. Weldon."

"I have been suspicious of young Jones from the first," said Arthur; "but I have been studying this boy's character, and he is positively incapable of the crimes you accuse him of, such as robbery and murder. In other words, whatever Jones may be, he is not Andrews; or, if by chance he proves to be Andrews, then Andrews is innocent of crime. All your theories are based upon a desire to secure rewards, backed by a chain of circumstantial evidence."

"A chain," said Le Drieux, grimly, "that will hold Jack Andrews fast in its coils, clever though he is."

"Circumstantial evidence," retorted Mr. Merrick, "doesn't amount to shucks! It is constantly getting good people into trouble and allowing rascals to escape. Nothing but direct evidence will ever convince me that a man is guilty."

Le Drieux shrugged his shoulders.

"The pearls are evidence enough," said he.

"To be sure. Evidence enough to free the poor boy of suspicion. You may be a better messenger than you are a detective, Mr. Le Drieux, but that doesn't convince me you are a judge of pearls."

The agent rose with a frown of annoyance.

"I am going to have Jack Andrews arrested in the morning," he remarked. "If you warn him, in the meantime, I shall charge you with complicity."

Uncle John nearly choked with anger, but he maintained his dignity.

"I have no knowledge of your Jack Andrews," he replied, and turned his back.

CHAPTER XVI - TROUBLE

Uncle John and Arthur decided not to mention to the girls this astounding charge of Isidore Le Drieux, fearing the news would make them nervous and disturb their rest, so when the men joined the merry party in the alcove they did not refer to their late interview.

Afterward, however, when all but Arthur Weldon had gone to bed and he was sitting in Uncle John's room, the two discussed the matter together with much seriousness.

"We ought to do something, sir," said Arthur. "This Jones is a mere boy, and in poor health at that. He has no friends, so far as we know, other than ourselves. Therefore it is our duty to see him through this trouble."

Mr. Merrick nodded assent.

"We cannot prevent the arrest," he replied, "for Le Drieux will not listen to reason. If we aided Jones to run away he would soon be caught. Absurd as the charge is, the youngster must face it and prove his innocence."

Arthur paced the floor in a way that indicated he was disturbed by this verdict.

"He ought to have no difficulty in proving he is not Jack Andrews," he remarked, reflectively; "and yet--those pearls are difficult to explain. Their similarity to the ones stolen in Europe fooled the expert, Le Drieux, and they are likely to fool a judge or jury. I hope Jones has some means of proving that he brought the pearls from Sangoa. That would settle the matter at once."

"As soon as he is arrested we will get him a lawyer--the best in this country," said Mr. Merrick. "More than that we cannot do, but a good lawyer will know the proper method of freeing his client."

The next morning they were up early, awaiting developments; but Le Drieux seemed in no hurry to move. He had breakfast at about nine o'clock, read his newspaper for a half hour or so, and then deliberately left the hotel. All of Mr. Merrick's party had breakfasted before this and soon after Le Drieux had gone away young Jones appeared in the lobby. He was just in time to see the Stanton girls drive away in their automobile, accompanied by their Aunt Jane.

"The motion picture stars must be late to-day," said the boy, looking after them.

"They are," answered Patsy, standing beside him at the window; "but Maud says this happens to be one of their days of leisure. No picture is to be taken and they have only to rehearse a new play. But it's a busy life, seems to me, and it would really prove hard work if the girls didn't enjoy it so much."

"Yes," said he, "it's a fascinating profession. I understand, and nothing can be called work that is interesting. When we are obliged to do something that we do not like to do, it becomes 'work.' Otherwise, what is usually called 'work' is mere play, for it furnishes its quota of amusement."

He was quite unconscious of any impending misfortune and when Beth and Louise joined Patsy in thanking him for his pretty gifts of the pearls he flushed with pleasure. Evidently their expressions of delight were very grateful to his ears.

Said Uncle John, in a casual way: "Those are remarkably fine pearls, to have come from such an island as Sangoa."

"But we find much better ones there, I assure you," replied the boy. "I have many in my room of much greater value, but did not dare ask you to accept them as gifts."

"Do many pearls come from Sangoa, then?" asked Arthur.

"That is our one industry," answered the young man. "Many years ago my father discovered the pearl fisheries. It was after he had purchased the island, but he recognized the value of the pearls and brought a colony of people from America to settle at Sangoa and devote their time to pearl fishing. Once or twice every year we send a ship to market with a consignment of pearls to our agent, and--to be quite frank with you--that is why I am now able to build the picture theatres I have contracted for, as well as the film factory."

"I see," said Uncle John. "But tell me this, please: Why is Sangoa so little known, or rather, so quite unknown?"

"My father," Jones returned, "loved quiet and seclusion. He was willing to develop the pearl fisheries, but objected to the flock of adventurers sure to descend upon his island if its wealth of pearls became generally known. His colony he selected with great care and with few exceptions they are a sturdy, wholesome lot, enjoying the peaceful life of Sangoa and thoroughly satisfied with their condition there. It is only within the last two years that our American agents knew where our pearls came from, yet they could not locate the island if they tried. I do not feel the same desire my father did to keep the secret, although I would dislike to see Sangoa overrun with tourists or traders."

He spoke so quietly and at the same time so convincingly that both Arthur and Uncle John accepted his explanation unquestioningly. Nevertheless, in the embarrassing dilemma in which Jones would presently be involved, the story would be sure to bear the stamp of unreality to any uninterested hearer.

The girls had now begun to chatter over the theatre plans, and their "financial backer"--as Patsy Doyle called him--joined them with eager interest. Arthur sat at

a near-by desk writing a letter; Uncle John glanced over the morning paper; Inez, the Mexican nurse, brought baby to Louise for a kiss before it went for a ride in its perambulator.

An hour had passed when Le Drieux entered the lobby in company with a thin-faced, sharp-eyed man in plain clothes. They walked directly toward the group that was seated by the open alcove window, and Arthur Weldon, observing them and knowing what was about to happen, rose from the writing-desk and drew himself tensely together as he followed them. Uncle John lowered his paper, frowned at Le Drieux and then turned his eyes upon the face of young Jones.

It was the thin-featured man who advanced and lightly touched the boy's arm.

"Beg pardon, sir," said he, in even, unemotional tones. "You are Mr. Andrews, I believe--Mr. Jack Andrews?"

The youth turned his head to look at his questioner.

"No, sir," he answered with a smile. "A case of mistaken identity. My name is Jones." Then, continuing his speech to Patsy Doyle, he said: "There is no need to consider the acoustic properties of our theatres, for the architect--"

"Pardon me again," interrupted the man, more sternly. "I am positive this is not a case of mistaken identity. We have ample proof that Jack Andrews is parading here, under the alias of 'A. Jones.'"

The boy regarded him with a puzzled expression.

"What insolence!" muttered Beth in an under-tone but audible enough to be distinctly heard.

The man flushed slightly and glanced at Le Drieux, who nodded his head. Then he continued firmly:

"In any event, sir, I have a warrant for your arrest, and I hope you will come with me quietly and so avoid a scene."

The boy grew pale and then red. His eyes narrowed as he stared fixedly at the officer. But he did not change his position, nor did he betray either fear or agitation. In a voice quite unmoved he asked:

"On what charge do you arrest me?"

"You are charged with stealing a valuable collection of pearls from the Countess Ahmberg, at Vienna, about a year ago."

"But I have never been in Vienna."

"You will have an opportunity to prove that."

"And my name is not Andrews."

"You must prove that, also."

The boy thought for a moment. Then he asked:

"Who accuses me?"

"This gentleman; Mr. Le Drieux. He is an expert in pearls, knows intimately all those in the collection of the countess and has recognized several which you have recently presented to your friends, as among those you brought from Austria."

Again Jones smiled.

"This is absurd, sir," he remarked.

The officer returned the smile, but rather grimly.

"It is the usual protest, Mr. Andrews. I don't blame you for the denial, but the evidence against you is very strong. Will you come? And quietly?"

"I am unable to offer physical resistance," replied the young fellow, as he slowly rose from his chair and displayed his thin figure. "Moreover," he added, with a touch of humor, "I believe there's a fine for resisting an officer. I suppose you have a legal warrant. May I be permitted to see it?"

The officer produced the warrant. Jones perused it slowly and then handed it to Mr. Merrick, who read it and passed it back to the officer.

"What shall I do, sir?" asked the boy.

"Obey the law," answered Uncle John. "This officer is only the law's instrument and it is useless to argue with him. But I will go with you to the police station and furnish bail."

Le Drieux shook his head.

"Quite impossible, Mr. Merrick," he said. "This is not aailable offense."

"Are you sure?"

"I am positive. This is an extradition case, of international importance. Andrews, after an examination, will be taken to New York and from there to Vienna, where his crime was committed."

"But he has committed no crime!"

Le Drieux shrugged his shoulders.

"He is accused, and he must prove his innocence," said he.

"But that is nonsense!" interposed Arthur warmly. "There is no justice in such an assertion. If I know anything of the purpose of the law, and I think I do, you must first prove this man's guilt before you carry him to Austria to be tried by a foreign court."

"I don't care a snap for the purpose of the law," retorted Le Drieux. "Our treaty with Austria provides for extradition, and that settles it. This man is already under arrest. The judge who issued the warrant believes that Jones is Jack Andrews and that Jack Andrews stole the pearls from the Countess Ahmberg. Of course, the prisoner will have a formal examination, when he may defend himself as best he can, but we haven't made this move without being sure of our case, and it will be rather difficult for him to escape the penalty of his crimes, clever as he is."

"Clever?" It was Jones himself who asked this, wonderingly.

Le Drieux bowed to him with exaggerated politeness.

"I consider you the cleverest rogue in existence," said he. "But even the cleverest may be trapped, in time, and your big mistake was in disposing of those pearls so openly. See here," he added, taking from his pocket a small packet. "Here are the famous Taprobane pearls--six of them--which were found in your room a half hour ago. They, also, were a part of the countess' collection."

"Oh, you have been to my room?"

"Under the authority of the law."

"And you have seen those pearls before?"

"Several times. I am an expert in pearls and can recognize their value at a glance," said Le Drieux with much dignity.

Jones gave a little chuckle and then turned deprecatingly to Mr. Merrick.

"You need not come with me to the station, sir," said he; "but, if you wish to assist me, please send me a lawyer and then go to the Continental and tell Mr. Goldstein of my predicament."

"I will do that," promptly replied Uncle John.

Jones turned to bow to the girls.

"I hope you young ladies can forgive this disgraceful scene," he remarked in a tone of regret rather than humiliation. "I do not see how any effort of mine could have avoided it. It seems to be one of the privileges of the people's guardians, in

your free country, to arrest and imprison anyone on a mere suspicion of crime. Here is a case in which someone has sadly blundered, and I imagine it is the pompous gentleman who claims to know pearls and does not," with a nod toward Le Drieux, who scowled indignantly.

"It is an outrage!" cried Beth.

"It's worse than that," said Patsy; "but of course you can easily prove your innocence."

"If I have the chance," the boy agreed. "But at present I am a prisoner and must follow my captor."

He turned to the officer and bowed to indicate that he was ready to go. Arthur shook the young fellow's hand and promised to watch his interests in every possible way.

"Go with him now, Arthur," proposed Louise. "It's a hard thing to be taken to jail and I'm sure he needs a friend at his side at this time."

"Good advice," agreed Uncle John. "Of course they'll give him a preliminary hearing before locking him up, and if you'll stick to him I'll send on a lawyer in double-quick time."

"Thank you," said the boy. "The lawyer first, Mr. Merrick, and then Goldstein."

CHAPTER XVII - UNCLE JOHN IS PUZZLED

Uncle John was off on his errands even before Jones and Arthur Weldon had driven away from the hotel with the officer and Le Drieux. There had been no "scene" and none of the guests of the hotel had any inkling of the arrest.

Uncle John had always detested lawyers and so he realized that he was sure to be a poor judge of the merits of any legal gentleman he might secure to defend Jones.

"I may as well leave it to chance," he grumbled, as he drove down the main boulevard. "The rascals are all alike!"

Glancing to this side and that, he encountered a sign on a building: "Fred A. Colby, Lawyer."

"All right; I mustn't waste time," he said, and stopping his driver he ascended a stairway to a gloomy upper hall. Here the doors, all in a row, were alike forbidding, but one of them bore the lawyer's name, so Mr. Merrick turned the handle and abruptly entered.

A sallow-faced young man, in his shirt-sleeves, was seated at a table littered with newspapers and magazines, engaged in the task of putting new strings on a battered guitar. As his visitor entered he looked up in surprise and laid down the instrument.

"I want to see Colby, the lawyer," began Uncle John, regarding the disordered room with strong disapproval.

"You are seeing him," retorted the young man, with a fleeting smile, "and I'll bet you two to one that if you came here on business you will presently go away and find another lawyer."

"Why?" questioned Mr. Merrick, eyeing him more closely.

"I don't impress people," explained Colby, picking up the guitar again. "I don't inspire confidence. As for the law, I know it as well as anyone--which is begging the question--but when I'm interviewed I have to admit I've had no experience."

"No practice?"

"Just a few collections, that's all I sleep on that sofa yonder, eat at a cafeteria, and so manage to keep body and soul together. Once in a while a stranger sees

my sign and needs a lawyer, so he climbs the stairs. But when he meets me face to face he beats a hasty retreat."

As he spoke, Colby tightened a string and began strumming it to get it tuned. Uncle John sat down on the one other chair in the room and thought a moment.

"You've been admitted to the bar?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Graduate of the Penn Law School."

"Then you know enough to defend an innocent man from an unjust accusation?"

Colby laid down the guitar.

"Ah!" said he, "this grows interesting. I really believe you have half a mind to give me your case. Sir, I know enough, I hope, to defend an innocent man; but I can't promise, offhand, to save him, even from an unjust accusation."

"Why not? Doesn't law stand for justice?"

"Perhaps; in the abstract. Anyhow, there's a pretty fable to that effect. But law in the abstract, and law as it is interpreted and applied, are not even second cousins. To be quite frank, I'd rather defend a guilty person than an innocent one. The chances are I'd win more easily. Are you sure your man is innocent?"

Uncle John scowled.

"Perhaps I'd better find another lawyer who is more optimistic," he said.

"Oh, I'm full of optimism, sir. My fault is that I'm not well known in the courts and have no arrangement to divide my fees with the powers that be. But I've been observing and I know the tricks of the trade as well as any lawyer in California. My chief recommendation, however, is that I'm eager to get a case, for my rent is sadly overdue. Why not try me, just to see what I'm able to do? I'd like to find that out myself."

"This is a very important matter," asserted Mr. Merrick.

"Very. If I'm evicted for lack of rent-money my career is crippled."

"I mean the case is a serious one."

"Are you willing to pay for success?"

"Liberally."

"Then I'll win it for you. Don't judge my ability by my present condition, sir. Tell me your story and I'll get to work at once."

Uncle John rose with sudden decision.

"Put on your coat," he said, and while Colby obeyed with alacrity he gave him a brief outline of the accusation brought against Jones. "I want you to take my car," he added, "and hasten to the police station, that you may be present at the preliminary examination. There will be plenty of time to talk afterward."

Colby nodded. His coat and hat made the young lawyer quite presentable and without another word he followed Mr. Merrick down the stairs and took his seat in the motorcar. Next moment he was whirling down the street and Uncle John looked after him with a half puzzled expression, as if he wondered whether or not he had blundered in his choice of a lawyer.

A little later he secured a taxicab and drove to the office of the Continental Film Manufacturing Company. Mr. Goldstein was in his office but sent word that he was too busy to see visitors. Nevertheless, when Mr. Merrick declared he had been sent by A. Jones, he was promptly admitted to the manager's sanctum.

"Our friend, young Jones," he began, "has just been arrested by a detective."

Goldstein's nervous jump fairly raised him off his chair; but in an instant he settled back and shot an eager, interested look at his visitor.

"What for, Mr. Merrick?" he demanded.

"For stealing valuable pearls from some foreign woman. A trumped-up charge, of course."

Goldstein rubbed the palms of his hands softly together. His face wore a look of supreme content.

"Arrested! Ah, that is bad, Mr. Merrick. It is very bad indeed. And it involves us--the Continental, you know--in an embarrassing manner."

"Why so?" asked Uncle John.

"Can't you see, sir?" asked the manager, trying hard to restrain a smile. "If the papers get hold of this affair, and state that our president--our biggest owner--the man who controls the Continental stock--is a common thief, the story will--eh--eh--put a bad crimp in our business, so to speak."

Uncle John looked at the man thoughtfully.

"So Jones controls the Continental, eh?" he said. "How long since, Mr. Goldstein?"

"Why, since the January meeting, a year and more ago. It was an astonishing thing, and dramatic--believe me! At the annual meeting of stockholders in walks this stripling--a mere kid--proves that he holds the majority of stock, elects himself president and installs a new board of directors, turning the tired and true builders of the business out in the cold. Then, without apology, promise or

argument, President Jones walks out again! In an hour he upset the old conditions, turned our business topsy-turvy and disappeared with as little regard for the Continental as if it had been a turnip. That stock must have cost him millions, and how he ever got hold of it is a mystery that has kept us all guessing ever since. The only redeeming feature of the affair was that the new board of directors proved decent and Jones kept away from us all and let us alone. I'd never seen him until he came here a few days ago and began to order me around. So, there, Mr. Merrick, you know as much about Jones as I do."

Mr. Merrick was perplexed. The more he heard of young Jones the more amazing; the boy seemed to be.

"Has the Continental lost money since Jones took possession?" he inquired.

"I think not," replied Goldstein, cautiously. "You're a business man, Mr. Merrick, and can understand that our machinery--our business system--is so perfect that it runs smoothly, regardless of who grabs the dividends. What I object to is this young fellow's impertinence in interfering with my work here. He walks in, reverses my instructions to my people, orders me to do unbusinesslike things and raises hob with the whole organization."

"Well, it belongs to him, Goldstein," said Uncle John, in defense of the boy. "He is your employer and has the right to dictate. But just at present he needs your help. He asked me to come here and tell you of his arrest."

Goldstein shrugged his shoulders.

"His arrest is none of my business," was his reply. "If Jones stole the money to buy Continental stock he must suffer the consequences. I'm working for the stock, not for the individual."

"But surely you will go to the station and see what can be done for him?" protested Uncle John.

"Surely I will not," retorted the manager. "What's the use? There isn't even a foot of good picture film in so common a thing as the arrest of a thief--and the censors would forbid it if there were. Let Jones fight his own battles."

"It occurs to me," suggested Mr. Merrick, who was growing indignant, "that Mr. Jones will be able to satisfy the court that he is not a thief, and so secure his freedom without your assistance. What will happen then, Mr. Goldstein?"

"Then? Why, it is still none of my business. I'm the manager of a motion picture concern--one of the biggest concerns in the world--and I've nothing to do with the troubles of my stockholders."

He turned to his desk and Mr. Merrick was obliged to go away without farther parley. On his way out he caught a glimpse of Maud Stanton passing through the building. She was dressed in the costume of an Indian princess and looked radiantly beautiful. Uncle John received a nod and a smile and then she was gone, without as yet a hint of the misfortune that had overtaken A. Jones of Sangoa.

Returning to the hotel, rather worried and flustered by the morning's events, he found the girls quietly seated in the lobby, busy over their embroidery.

"Well, Uncle," said Patsy, cheerfully, "is Ajo still in limbo?"

"I suppose so," he rejoined, sinking into an easy chair beside her. "Is Arthur back yet?"

"No," said Louise, answering for her husband, "he is probably staying to do all he can for the poor boy."

"Did you get a lawyer?" inquired Beth.

"I got a fellow who claims to be a lawyer; but I'm not sure he will be of any use."

Then he related his interview with Colby, to the amusement of his nieces, all three of whom approved the course he had taken and were already prepared to vouch for the briefless barrister's ability, on the grounds that eccentricity meant talent.

"You see," explained Miss Patsy, "he has nothing else to do but jump heart and soul into this case, so Ajo will be able to command his exclusive services, which with some big, bustling lawyer would be impossible."

Luncheon was over before Arthur finally appeared, looking somewhat grave and perturbed.

"They won't accept bail," he reported. "Jones must stay in jail until his formal examination, and if they then decide that he is really Jack Andrews he will remain in jail until his extradition papers arrive."

"When will he be examined?" asked Louise.

"Whenever the judge feels in the humor, it seems. Our lawyer demanded Jones' release at once, on the ground that a mistake of identity had been made; but the stupid judge is of the opinion that the charge against our friend is valid. At any rate he refused to let him go. He wouldn't even argue the case at present. He issues a warrant on a charge of larceny, claps a man in jail whether innocent or not, and refuses to let him explain anything or prove his innocence until a formal examination is held."

"There is some justice in that," remarked Uncle John. "Suppose Jones is guilty; it would be a mistake to let him go free until a thorough examination had been made."

"And if he is innocent, he will have spent several days in jail, been worried and disgraced, and there is no redress for the false imprisonment. The judge won't even apologize to him!"

"It's all in the interests of law and order, I suppose," said Patsy; "but the law seems dreadfully inadequate to protect the innocent. I suppose it's because the courts are run by cheap and incompetent people who couldn't earn a salary in any other way."

"Someone must run them, and it isn't an ambitious man's job," replied Uncle John. "What do you think of the lawyer I sent you, Arthur?"

The young ranchman smiled.

"He's a wonder, Uncle. He seemed to know more about the case than Jones or I did, and more about the law than the judge did. He's an irrepressible fellow, and told that rascal Le Drieux a lot about pearls that the expert never had heard before. Where did you find him, sir?"

Uncle John explained.

"Well," said Arthur, "I think Jones is in good hands. Colby has secured him a private room at the jail, with a bath and all the comforts of home. Meals are to be sent in from a restaurant and when I left the place the jailer had gone out to buy Jones a stock of books to while away his leisure hours--which are bound to be numerous. I'd no idea a prisoner could live in such luxury."

"Money did it, I suppose," Patsy shrewdly suggested.

"Yes. Jones wrote a lot of checks. Colby got a couple of hundred for a retaining fee and gleefully informed us it was more money than he had ever owned at one time in all his previous career. I think he will earn it, however."

"Where is he now?" asked Uncle John.

"Visiting all the newspaper offices, to 'buy white space,' as he put it. In other words, Colby will bribe the press to silence, at least until the case develops."

"I'm glad of that," exclaimed Beth. "What do you think of this queer business, Arthur?"

"Why, I've no doubt of the boy's innocence, if that is what you mean. I've watched him closely and am positive he is no more Jack Andrews than I am. But I fear he will have a hard task to satisfy the judge that he is falsely accused. It would be an

admission of error, you see, and so the judge will prefer to find him guilty. It is this same judge--Wilton, I think his name is--who will conduct the formal examination, and to-day he openly sneered at the mention of Sangoa. On the other hand, he evidently believed every statement made by Le Drieux about the identity of the pearls found in Jones' possession. Le Drieux has a printed list of the Ahmberg pearls, and was able to check the Jones' pearls off this list with a fair degree of accuracy. It astonished even me, and I could see that Jones was equally amazed."

"Wouldn't it be queer if they convicted him!" exclaimed Beth.

"It would be dreadful, since he is innocent," said Patsy.

"There is no need to worry about that just at present," Arthur assured them. "I am placing a great deal of confidence in the ability of Lawyer Colby."

CHAPTER XVIII - DOUBTS AND DIFFICULTIES

The Stanton girls and Mrs. Montrose came in early that afternoon. They had heard rumors of the arrest of Jones and were eager to learn what had occurred. Patsy and Beth followed them to their rooms to give them every known detail and canvass the situation in all its phases.

"Goldstein has been an angel all afternoon," said Flo. "He grinned and capered about like a schoolboy and some of us guessed he'd been left a fortune."

"He ought to be ashamed of himself." Patsy indignantly asserted. "The man admitted to Uncle John that Ajo is the biggest stockholder in the Continental, the president, to boot; yet Goldstein wouldn't lift a finger to help him and positively refused to obey his request to go to him after he was arrested."

"I know about that," said Aunt Jane, quietly. "Goldstein talked to me about the affair this afternoon and declared his conviction that young Jones is really a pearl thief. He has taken a violent dislike to the boy and is delighted to think his stock will be taken away from him."

Maud had silently listened to this dialogue as she dressed for dinner. But now she impetuously broke into the conversation, saying:

"Something definite ought to be done for the boy. He needs intelligent assistance. I'm afraid his situation is serious."

"That is what Arthur thinks," said Beth. "He says that unless he can furnish proof that he is not Jack Andrews, and that he came by those pearls honestly, he will be shipped to Austria for trial. No one knows what those foreigners will do to him, but he would probably fare badly in their hands."

"Such being the logical conclusion," said Maud, "we must make our fight now, at the examination."

"Uncle John has engaged a lawyer," announced Patsy, "and if he proves bright and intelligent he ought to be able to free Ajo."

"I'd like to see that lawyer, and take his measure," answered Maud, musingly, and her wish was granted soon after they had finished dinner. Colby entered the hotel, jaunty as ever, and Arthur met him and introduced him to the girls.

"You must forgive me for coming on a disagreeable mission," began the young attorney, "but I have promised the judge that I would produce all the pearls Mr. Jones gave you, not later than to-morrow morning. He wants them as evidence,

and to compare privately with Le Drieux's list, although he will likely have the expert at his elbow. So I can't promise that you will ever get your jewels back again."

"Oh. You think, then, that Mr. Jones is guilty?" said Maud coldly.

"No, indeed; I believe he is innocent. A lawyer should never suspect his client, you know. But to win I must prove my case, and opposed to me is that terrible Le Drieux, who insists he is never mistaken."

"Arthur--Mr. Weldon--says you understand pearls as well as Mr. Le Drieux does," suggested Patsy.

"I thank him; but he is in error. I chattered to the judge about pearls, it is true, because I found he couldn't tell a pearl from a glass bead; and I believe I even perplexed Le Drieux by hinting at a broad knowledge on the subject which I do not possess. It was all a bit of bluff on my part. But by to-morrow morning this knowledge will be a fact, for I've bought a lot of books on pearls and intend to sit up all night reading them."

"That was a clever idea," said Uncle John, nodding approval.

"So my mission here this evening is to get the pearls, that I may study them as I read," continued Colby. "Heretofore I've only seen the things through a plate glass window, or a show case. The success of our defense depends upon our refuting Le Drieux's assertion that the pearls found in Jones' possession are a part of the Countess Ahmberg's collection. He has a full description of the stolen gems and I must be prepared to show that none of the Jones' pearls is on the list."

"Can you do that?" asked Maud.

She was gazing seriously into the young man's eyes and this caused him to blush and stammer a little as he replied:

"I--I hope to, Miss Stanton."

"And are you following no other line of defense?" she inquired.

He sat back and regarded the girl curiously for a moment.

"I would like you to suggest some other line of defense," he replied. "I've tried to find one--and failed."

"Can't you prove he is not Jack Andrews?"

"Not if the identity of the pearls is established," said the lawyer. "If the pearls were stolen, and if Jones cannot explain how he obtained possession of them, the evidence is prima facia that he is Jack Andrews, or at least his accomplice."

Moreover, his likeness to the photograph is somewhat bewildering, you must admit."

This gloomy view made them all silent for a time, each thoughtfully considering the matter. Then Maud asked:

"Do you know the cash value of Mr. Jones' stock in the Continental Film Company?"

Colby shook his head, but Uncle John replied:

"Goldstein told me it is worth millions."

"Ah!" exclaimed the girl. "There, then, is our proof."

The lawyer reflected, with knitted brows.

"I confess I don't quite see your point," said he.

"How much were those stolen pearls worth?" asked the girl.

"I don't know."

"You know they were not worth millions. Jack Andrews was an adventurer, by Le Drieux's showing; he was a fellow who lived by his wits and generally earned his livelihood by gambling with the scions of wealthy families. Even had he stolen the Countess' pearls and disposed of the collection at enormous prices--which a thief is usually unable to do--he would still have been utterly unable to purchase a controlling interest in the Continental stock."

She spoke with quiet assurance, but her statement roused the group to sudden excitement.

"Hooray!" cried Patsy. "There's your proof, Mr. Colby."

"The logic of genius," commented Uncle John.

"Why, it's proof positive!" said Beth.

"It is certainly a strong argument in favor of the boy's innocence," asserted Arthur Weldon.

"Maud's a wonder when she wakes up. She ought to have been a 'lady detective,'" remarked Flo, regarding her sister admiringly.

Colby, at first startled, was now also regarding Maud Stanton with open admiration; but there was an odd smile on his lips, a smile of indulgent toleration.

"Le Drieux's statement connects Andrews with two other pearl robberies," he reminded her. "The necklace of the Princess Lemoine is said to be priceless, and the Grandison collection stolen in London was scarcely less valuable than that of Countess Ahmberg."

"Allowing all that," said Mr. Merrick, "two or three hundred thousand dollars would doubtless cover the value of the entire lot. I am quite certain, Mr. Colby, that Miss Stanton's suggestion will afford you an excellent line of defense."

"I shall not neglect it, you may be sure," replied the lawyer. "Tonight I'll try to figure out, as nearly as possible, the total cash value of all the stolen pearls, and of course Jones will tell us what he paid for his stock, or how much it is worth. But I am not sure this argument will have as much weight as Miss Stanton suggests it may. A bold gambler, such as Andrews, might have obtained a huge sum at Baden Baden or Monte Carlo; and, were he indeed so clever a thief as his record indicates, he may have robbed a bank, or stolen in some way an immense sum of money. Logically, the question has weight and I shall present it as effectively as I can; but, as I said, I rely more on my ability to disprove the identity of the pearls, on which the expert Le Drieux lays so much stress. Jones will have a thorough and formal examination within a few days--perhaps to-morrow--and if the judge considers that Andrews the pearl thief has been captured, he will be held here pending the arrival from Washington of the extradition papers--say two or three weeks longer."

"Then we shall have all that time to prove his innocence?" inquired Maud.

"Unfortunately, no. There will be no further trial of the prisoner until he gets to Vienna and is delivered to the authorities there. All our work must be done previous to the formal examination."

"You do not seem very hopeful," observed Maud, a hint of reproach in her tone.

"Then appearances are against me, Miss Stanton," replied the lawyer with a smile. "This is my first important case, and if I win it my future is assured; so I mean to win. But in order to do that I must consider the charge of the prosecution, the effect of its arguments upon the judge, and then find the right means to combat them. When I am with you, the friends of the accused, I may consider the seamy side of the fabric; but the presiding judge will find me so sure of my position that he will instinctively agree with me."

They brought him the pearls Jones had presented to them and then the lawyer bade them good night and went to his office to master the history of pearls in general and those famous ones stolen from Countess Ahmberg in particular.

When he had gone Uncle John remarked:

"Well, what do you think of him?"

They seemed in doubt.

"I think he will do all he can," said Patsy.

"And he appears quite a clever young man," added Beth, as if to encourage them.

"Allowing all that," said Maud, gravely, "he has warned us of the possibility of failure. I cannot understand how the coils of evidence have wrapped themselves so tightly around poor Ajo."

"That," asserted Flo, "is because you cannot understand Ajo himself. Nor can I; nor can any of us!"

CHAPTER XIX - MAUD MAKES A MEMORANDUM

My mother used to say to me: "Never expect to find brains in a pretty girl." Perhaps she said it because I was not a pretty girl and she wished to encourage me. In any event, that absurd notion of the ancients that when the fairies bestow the gift of beauty on a baby they withhold all other qualities has so often been disproved that we may well disregard it.

Maud Stanton was a pretty girl--indeed, a beautiful girl--but she possessed brains as well as beauty and used her intellect to advantage more often than her quiet demeanor would indicate to others than her most intimate associates. From the first she had been impressed by the notion that there was something mysterious about A. Jones and that his romantic explanation of his former life and present position was intended to hide a truth that would embarrass him, were it fully known. Therefore she had secretly observed the young man, at such times as they were together, and had treasured every careless remark he had made--every admission or assertion--and made a note of it. The boy's arrest had startled her because it was so unexpected, and her first impulse was to doubt his innocence. Later, however, she had thoroughly reviewed the notes she had made and decided he was innocent.

In the quiet of her own room, when she was supposed to be asleep, Maud got out her notebook and read therein again the review of all she had learned concerning A. Jones of Sangoa.

"For a boy, he has a good knowledge of business; for a foreigner, he has an excellent conception of modern American methods," she murmured thoughtfully. "He is simple in little things; shrewd, if not wise, in important matters. He proved this by purchasing the control of the Continental, for its shares pay enormous dividends.

"Had he stolen those pearls, I am sure he would have been too shrewd to have given a portion of them to us, knowing we would display them openly and so attract attention to them. A thief so ingenious as Andrews, for instance, would never have done so foolish a thing as that, I am positive. Therefore, Jones is not Andrews.

"Now, to account for the likeness between Andrews, an American adventurer, and Jones, reared and educated in the mysterious island of Sangoa. Ajo's father must have left some near relatives in this country when he became a recluse in his far-away island. Why did he become a recluse? That's a subject I must consider carefully, for he was a man of money, a man of science, a man of affairs. Jones

has told us he has no relatives here. He may have spoken honestly, if his father kept him in ignorance of the family history. I'm not going to jump at the conclusion that the man who calls himself Jack Andrews is a near relative of our Ajo--a cousin, perhaps--but I'll not forget that that might explain the likeness between them.

"Ajo's father must have amassed a great fortune, during many years, from his pearl fisheries. That would explain why the boy has so much money at his disposal. He didn't get it from the sale of stolen pearls, that is certain. In addition to the money he invested in the Continental, he has enough in reserve to expend another million or so in Patsy Doyle's motion picture scheme, and he says he can spare it easily and have plenty left! This, in my opinion, is a stronger proof of Jones' innocence than Lawyer Colby seems to consider it. To me, it is conclusive.

"Now, then, where is Sangoa? How can one get to the island? And, finally, how did Jones get here from Sangoa and how is he to return, if he ever wants to go back to his valuable pearl fisheries, his people and his home?"

She strove earnestly to answer these questions, but could not with her present knowledge. So she tucked the notebook into a drawer of her desk, put out her light and got into bed.

But sleep would not come to her. The interest she took in the fate of young Jones was quite impersonal. She liked the boy in the same way she had liked dozens of boys. The fact that she had been of material assistance in saving his life aroused no especial tenderness in her. On his own account, however, Jones was interesting to her because he was so unusual. The complications that now beset him added to this interest because they were so curious and difficult to explain. Maud had the feeling that she had encountered a puzzle to tax her best talents, and so she wanted to solve it.

Suddenly she bounded out of bed and turned on the electric light. The notebook was again brought into requisition and she penciled on its pages the following words:

"What was the exact date that Jack Andrews landed in America? What was the exact date that Ajo landed from Sangoa? The first question may be easily answered, for doubtless the police have the record. But--the other?"

Then she replaced the book, put out the light and went to sleep very easily.

That last thought, now jotted down in black and white, had effectually cleared her mind of its cobwebs.

CHAPTER XX - A GIRLISH NOTION

Colby came around next morning just as Mr. Merrick was entering the breakfast room, and the little man took the lawyer in to have a cup of coffee. The young attorney still maintained his jaunty air, although red-eyed from his night's vigil, and when he saw the Stanton girls and their Aunt Jane having breakfast by an open window he eagerly begged permission to join them, somewhat to Uncle John's amusement.

"Well?" demanded Maud, reading Colby's face with her clear eyes.

"I made a night of it, as I promised," said he. "This morning I know so much about pearls that I'm tempted to go into the business."

"As Jack Andrews did?" inquired Flo.

"Not exactly," he answered with a smile. "But it's an interesting subject--so interesting that I only abandoned my reading when I found I was burning my electric lamp by daylight. Listen: A pearl is nothing more or less than nacre, a fluid secretion of a certain variety of oyster--not the eatable kind. A grain of sand gets between the folds of the oyster and its shell and irritates the beast. In self-defense the oyster covers the sand with a fluid which hardens and forms a pearl."

"I've always known that," said Flo, with a toss of her head.

"Yes; but I want you all to bear it in mind, for it will explain a discovery I have made. Before I get to that, however, I want to say that at one time the island of Ceylon supplied the world with its most famous pearls. The early Egyptians discovered them there, as well as on the Persian and Indian coasts. The pearl which Cleopatra is said to have dissolved in wine and swallowed was worth about four hundred thousand dollars in our money; but of course pearls were scarce in her day. A single pearl was cut in two and used for earrings for the statue of Venus in the Pantheon at Rome, and the sum paid for it was equal to about a quarter of a million dollars. Sir Thomas Gresham, in the days of Queen Elizabeth, had a pearl valued at about seventy-five thousand dollars which he treated in the same manner Cleopatra did, dissolving it in wine and boasting he had given the most expensive dinner ever known."

"All of which--" began Maud, impatiently.

"All of which, Miss Stanton, goes to show that pearls have been of great price since the beginning of history. Nowadays we get just as valuable pearls from the South Seas, and even from Panama, St. Margarita and the Caromandel Coast, as

ever came from Ceylon. But only those of rare size, shape or color are now valued at high prices. For instance, a string of matched pearls such as that owned by Princess Lemoine is estimated as worth only eighty thousand dollars, because it could be quite easily duplicated. The collection of Countess Ahmberg was noted for its variety of shapes and colors more than for its large or costly pearls; and that leads to my great discovery."

"Thank heaven," said Flo, with a sigh.

"I have discovered that our famous expert, Le Drieux, is an arrant humbug."

"We had suspected that," remarked Maud.

"Now we know it," declared Colby. "Pearls, I have learned, change their color, their degree of luster, even their weight, according to atmospheric conditions and location. A ten-penny-weight pearl in Vienna might weigh eight or nine pennyweights here in California, or it is more likely to weigh twelve. The things absorb certain moistures and chemicals from the air and sun, and shed those absorptions when kept in darkness or from the fresh air. Pearls die, so to speak; but are often restored to life by immersions in sea-water, their native element. As for color: the pink and blue pearls often grow white, at times, especially if kept long in darkness, but sun-baths restore their former tints. In the same way a white pearl, if placed near the fumes of ammonia, changes to a pinkish hue, while certain combinations of chemicals render them black, or 'smoked.' A clever man could steal a pink pearl, bleach it white, and sell it to its former owner without its being recognized. Therefore, when our expert, Le Drieux, attempts to show that the pearls found in Jones' possession are identical with those stolen from the Austrian lady, he fails to allow for climatic or other changes and cannot be accurate enough to convince anyone who knows the versatile characteristics of these gems."

"Ah, but does the judge know that, Mr. Colby?" asked Maud.

"I shall post him. After that, the conviction of the prisoner will be impossible."

"Do you think the examination will be held to-day?" inquired Mr. Merrick.

"I cannot tell that. It will depend upon the mood of Judge Wilton. If he feels grouchy or disagreeable, he is liable to postpone the case. If he is in good spirits and wants to clear his docket he may begin the examination at ten o'clock, to-day, which is the hour set for it."

"Is your evidence ready, Mr. Colby?"

"Such as I can command, Miss Stanton," he replied. "Last evening I wired New York for information as to the exact amount of stock Jones owns in the Continental, and I got a curious reply. The stock is valued at nineteen hundred

thousand dollars, but no one believes that Jones owns it personally. It is generally thought that for politic reasons the young man was made the holder of stock for several different parties, who still own it, although it is in Jones' name. The control of stock without ownership is not unusual. It gives the real owners an opportunity to hide behind their catspaw, who simply obeys their instructions."

"I do not believe that Jones is connected with anyone in that manner," said Mr. Merrick.

"Nor do I," asserted Aunt Jane. "His interference with Goldstein's plans proves he is under no obligations to others, for he has acted arbitrarily, in accordance with his personal desires and against the financial interests of the concern."

"Why didn't you ask him about this, instead of wiring to New York?" demanded Maud.

"He might not give us exact information, under the circumstances," said Colby.

The girl frowned.

"Jones is not an ordinary client," continued the lawyer, coolly. "He won't tell me anything about himself, or give me what is known as 'inside information.' On the contrary, he contents himself with saying he is innocent and I must prove it. I'm going to save the young man, but I'm not looking to him for much assistance."

Maud still frowned. Presently she said:

"I want to see Mr. Jones. Can you arrange an interview for me, sir?"

"Of course. You'd better go into town with me this morning. If the examination is held, you will see Jones then. If it's postponed, you may visit him in the jail."

Maud reflected a moment.

"Very well," said she, "I'll go with you." Then, turning to her aunt, she continued: "You must make my excuses to Mr. Goldstein, Aunt Jane."

Mrs. Montrose eyed her niece critically.

"Who will accompany you, Maud?" she asked.

"Why, I'll go," said Patsy Doyle; and so it was settled, Uncle John agreeing to escort the young ladies and see them safely home again.

CHAPTER XXI - THE YACHT "ARABELLA"

As the party drove into town Colby said:

"It wouldn't be a bad idea for Jones to bribe that fellow Le Drieux. If Le Drieux, who holds a warrant for the arrest of Jack Andrews, issued by the Austrian government and vided in Washington, could be won to our side, the whole charge against our friend might be speedily dissolved."

"Disgraceful!" snapped Maud indignantly. "I am positive Mr. Jones would not consider such a proposition."

"Diplomatic, not disgraceful," commented the lawyer, smiling at her. "Why should Jones refuse to consider bribery?"

"To use money to defeat justice would be a crime as despicable as stealing pearls," she said.

"Dear me!" muttered Colby, with a puzzled frown. "What a queer way to look at it. Le Drieux has already been bribed, by a liberal reward, to run down a supposed criminal. If we bribe him with a larger sum to give up the pursuit of Jones, whom we believe innocent, we are merely defending ourselves from a possible injustice which may be brought about by an error of judgment."

"Isn't this judge both able and honest?" asked Uncle John.

"Wilton? Well, possibly. His ability consists in his knowledge of law, rather than of men and affairs. He believes himself honest, I suppose, but I'll venture to predict he will act upon prejudice and an assumption of personal dignity, rather than attempt to discover if his personal impressions correspond with justice. A judge, Mr. Merrick, is a mere man, with all the average man's failings; so we must expect him to be quite human."

"Never mind," said Patsy resignedly. "Perhaps we shall find him a better judge than you are lawyer."

"He has had more experience, anyhow," said Colby, much amused at the shot.

They found, on arriving at court, that the case had already been postponed. They drove to the jail and obtained permission to see the prisoner, who was incarcerated under the name of "Jack Andrews, alias A. Jones." Maud would have liked a private audience, but the lawyer was present as well as Patsy and Mr. Merrick, and she did not like to ask them to go away.

The boy greeted them with his old frank smile and did not seem in the least oppressed by the fact that he was a prisoner accused of an ugly crime. The interview was held in a parlor of the jail, a guard standing by the door but discreetly keeping out of earshot.

Colby first informed the boy of the postponement of his formal examination and then submitted to his client an outline of the defense he had planned. Jones listened quietly and shook his head.

"Is that the best you can do for me?"

"With my present knowledge, yes," returned the lawyer.

"And will it clear me from this suspicion?" was the next question.

"I hope so."

"You are not sure?"

"This is an extraordinary case, Mr. Jones. Your friends all believe you innocent, but the judge wants facts--cold, hard facts--and only these will influence him. Mr. Le Drieux, commissioned by the Austrian government, states that you are Jack Andrews, and have escaped to America after having stolen the pearls of a noble Viennese lady. He will offer, as evidence to prove his assertion, the photograph and the pearls. You must refute this charge with counter-evidence, in order to escape extradition and a journey to the country where the crime was committed. There you will be granted a regular trial, to be sure, but even if you then secure an acquittal you will have suffered many indignities and your good name will be permanently tarnished."

"Well, sir?"

"I shall work unceasingly to secure your release at the examination. But I wish I had some stronger evidence to offer in rebuttal."

"Go ahead and do your best," said the boy, nonchalantly. "I will abide by the result, whatever it may be."

"May I ask a few questions?" Maud timidly inquired.

He turned to her with an air of relief.

"Most certainly you may, Miss Stanton."

"And you will answer them?"

"I pledge myself to do so, if I am able."

"Thank you," she said. "I am not going to interfere with Mr. Colby's plans, but I'd like to help you on my own account, if I may."

He gave her a quick look, at once grateful, suspicious and amused. Then he said:

"Clear out, Colby. I'm sure you have a hundred things to attend to, and when you're gone I'll have a little talk with Miss Stanton."

The lawyer hesitated.

"If this conversation is likely to affect your case," he began, "then--"

"Then Miss Stanton will give you any information she may acquire," interrupted Jones, and that left Colby no alternative but to go away.

"Now, then, Miss Stanton, out with it!" said the boy.

"There are a lot of things we don't know, but ought to know, in order to defend you properly," she observed, looking at him earnestly.

"Question me, then."

"I want to know the exact date when you landed in this country from Sangoa."

"Let me see. It was the twelfth day of October, of last year."

"Oh! so long ago as that? It is fifteen months. Once you told us that you had been here about a year."

"I didn't stop to count the months, you see. The twelfth of October is correct."

"Where did you land?"

"At San Francisco."

"Direct from Sangoa?"

"Direct from Sangoa."

"And what brought you from Sangoa to San Francisco?"

"A boat."

"A sailing-ship?"

"No, a large yacht. Two thousand tons burden."

"Whose yacht was it?"

"Mine."

"Then where is it now?"

He reflected a moment.

"I think Captain Carg must be anchored at San Pedro, by now. Or perhaps he is at Long Beach, or Santa Monica," he said quietly.

"On this coast!" exclaimed Maud.

"Yes."

Patsy was all excitement by now and could no longer hold her tongue.

"Is the yacht Arabella yours?" she demanded.

"It is, Miss Patsy."

"Then it is lying off Santa Monica Bay. I've seen it!" she cried.

"It was named for my mother," said the boy, his voice softening, "and built by my father. In the Arabella I made my first voyage; so you will realize I am very fond of the little craft."

Maud was busily thinking.

"Is Captain Carg a Sangoan?" she asked.

"Of course. The entire crew are Sangoans."

"Then where has the yacht been since it landed you here fifteen months ago?"

"It returned at once to the island, and at my request has now made another voyage to America."

"It has been here several days."

"Quite likely."

"Has it brought more pearls from Sangoa?"

"Perhaps. I do not know, for I have not yet asked for the captain's report."

Both Uncle John and Patsy were amazed at the rapidity with which Maud was acquiring information of a really important character. Indeed, she was herself surprised and the boy's answers were already clearing away some of the mists. She stared at him thoughtfully as she considered her next question, and Jones seemed to grow thoughtful, too.

"I have no desire to worry my friends over my peculiar difficulties," he presently said. "Frankly, I am not in the least worried myself. The charge against me is so preposterous that I am sure to be released after the judge has examined me; and,

even at the worst--if I were sent to Vienna for trial--the Austrians would know very well that I am not the man they seek."

"That trip would cause you great inconvenience, however," suggested Mr. Merrick.

"I am told a prisoner is treated very well, if he is willing to pay for such consideration," said Jones.

"And your good name?" asked Maud, with a touch of impatience.

"My good name is precious only to me, and I know it is still untarnished. For your sake, my newly found friends, I would like the world to believe in me, but there is none save you to suffer through my disgrace, and you may easily ignore my acquaintance."

"What nonsense!" cried Patsy, scornfully. "Tell me, sir, what's to become of our grand motion picture enterprise, if you allow yourself to be shipped to Vienna as a captured thief?"

He winced a trifle at the blunt epithet but quickly recovered and smiled at her.

"I'm sorry, Miss Patsy," said he. "I know you will be disappointed if our enterprise is abandoned. So will I. Since this latest complication arose I fear I have not given our project the consideration it deserves."

The boy passed his hand wearily across his forehead and, rising from his seat, took a few nervous steps up and down the room. Then, pausing, he asked abruptly:

"Are you still inclined to be my champion, Miss Stanton?"

"If I can be of any help," she replied, simply.

"Then I wish you would visit the yacht, make the acquaintance of Captain Carg and tell him of the trouble I am in. Will you?"

"With pleasure. That is--I'll be glad to do your errand."

"I'll give you a letter to him," he continued, and turning to the attendant he asked for writing material, which was promptly furnished him. At the table he wrote a brief note and enclosed it in an envelope which he handed to Maud.

"You will find the captain a splendid old fellow," said he.

"Will he answer any questions I may ask him?" she demanded.

"That will depend upon your questions," he answered evasively. "Carg is considered a bit taciturn, I believe, but he has my best interests at heart and you will find him ready to serve me in any possible way."

"Is there any objection to my going with Maud?" asked Patsy. "I'd like to visit that yacht; it looks so beautiful from a distance."

"You may all go, if you wish," said he. "It might be well for Mr. Merrick to meet Captain Carg, who would prefer, I am sure, to discuss so delicate a matter as my arrest with a man. Not that he is ungallant, but with a man such as Mr. Merrick he would be more at his ease. Carg is a sailor, rather blunt and rugged, both in speech and demeanor, but wholly devoted to me because I am at present the Jones of Sangoa."

"I'll accompany the girls, of course," said Uncle John; "and I think we ought not to delay in seeing your man. Colby says you may be called for examination at any time."

"There is one more question I want to ask," announced Maud as they rose to go. "On what date did you reach New York, after landing at San Francisco?"

"Why, it must have been some time in last January. I know it was soon after Christmas, which I passed in Chicago."

"Is that as near as you can recollect the date?"

"Yes, at short notice."

"Then perhaps you can tell me the date you took possession of the Continental Film Company by entering the stockholders' meeting and ejecting yourself president?"

He seemed surprised at her information and the question drew from him an odd laugh.

"How did you learn about that incident?" he asked.

"Goldstein told Mr. Merrick. He said it was a coup d'etat."

The boy laughed again.

"It was really funny," said he. "Old Bingley, the last president, had no inkling that I controlled the stock. He was so sure of being reelected that he had a camera-man on hand to make a motion picture of the scene where all would hail him as the chief. The picture was taken, but it didn't interest Bingley any, for it showed the consternation on his face, and the faces of his favored coterie, when I rose and calmly voted him out of office with the majority of the stock."

"Oh!" exclaimed Maud. "There was a picture made of that scene, then?"

"To be sure. It was never shown but once to an audience of one. I sat and chuckled to myself while the film was being run."

"Was it kept, or destroyed?" asked the girl, breathlessly.

"I ordered it preserved amongst our archives. Probably Goldstein now has the negative out here, stored in our Hollywood vaults."

"And the date--when was it?" she demanded.

"Why, the annual meeting is always the last Thursday in January. Figure it out--it must have been the twenty-sixth. But is the exact date important, Miss Stanton?"

"Very," she announced. "I don't know yet the exact date that Andrews landed in New York on his return from Vienna, but if it happened to be later than the twenty-sixth of January--"

"I see. In that case the picture will clear me of suspicion."

"Precisely. I shall now go and wire New York for the information I need."

"Can't you get it of Le Drieux?" asked the young man.

"Perhaps so; I'll try. But it will be better to get the date from the steamship agent direct."

With this they shook the boy's hand, assuring him of their sympathy and their keen desire to aid him, and then hurried away from the jail.

CHAPTER XXII - MASCULINE AND FEMININE

Uncle John and the girls, after consulting together, decided to stop at the Hollywood studio and pick up Flo and Mrs. Montrose.

"It would be a shame to visit that lovely yacht without them," said Patsy; "and we were all invited, you know."

"Yes, invited by a host who is unavoidably detained elsewhere," added Uncle John.

"Still, that yacht is very exclusive," his niece stated, "and I'm sure we are the first Americans to step foot on its decks."

They were all in a brighter mood since the interview at the jail, and after a hurried lunch at the hotel, during which Maud related to the others the morning's occurrences, they boarded the big Merrick seven-passenger automobile and drove to Santa Monica Bay. Louise couldn't leave the baby, who was cutting teeth, but Arthur and Beth joined the party and on arrival at the beach Uncle John had no difficulty in securing a launch to take them out to the Arabella.

"They won't let you aboard, though," declared the boatman. "A good many have tried it, an' come back disjointed. There's something queer about that craft; but the gov'ment don't seem worried, so I guess it ain't a pirate."

The beauty of the yacht grew on them as they approached it. It was painted a pure white in every part and on the stern was the one word: Arabella, but no name of the port from which she hailed. The ladder was hoisted and fastened to an upper rail, but as they drew up to the smooth sides a close-cropped bullet-head projected from the bulwarks and a gruff voice demanded:

"Well, what's wanted?"

"We want to see Captain Carg," called Arthur, in reply.

The head wagged sidewise.

"No one allowed aboard," said the man.

"Here's a letter to the captain, from Mr. Jones," said Maud, exhibiting it.

The word seemed magical. Immediately the head disappeared and an instant later the boarding ladder began to descend. But the man, a sub-officer dressed in a neat uniform of white and gold, came quickly down the steps and held out his hand for the letter.

"Beg pardon," said he, touching his cap to the ladies, "but the rules are very strict aboard the Arabella. Will you please wait until I've taken this to the captain? Thank you!"

Then he ran lightly up the steps and they remained seated in the launch until he returned.

"The captain begs you to come aboard," he then said, speaking very respectfully but with a face that betrayed his wonder at the order of his superior. Then he escorted them up the side to the deck, which was marvelously neat and attractive. Some half a dozen sailors lounged here and there and these stared as wonderingly at the invasion of strangers as the subaltern had done. But their guide did not pause longer than to see that they had all reached the deck safely, when he led them into a spacious cabin.

Here they faced Captain Carg, whom Patsy afterward declared was the tallest, thinnest, chilliest man she had ever encountered. His hair was grizzled and hung low on his neck; his chin was very long and ended in a point; his nose was broad, with sensitive nostrils that marked every breath he drew. As for his eyes, which instantly attracted attention, they were brown and gentle as a girl's but had that retrospective expression that suggests far-away thoughts or an utter lack of interest in one's surroundings. They never looked at but through one. The effect of Carg's eyes was distinctly disconcerting.

The commander of the Arabella bowed with much dignity as his guests entered and with a sweep of his long arm he muttered in distant tones: "Pray be seated." They obeyed. The cabin was luxuriously furnished and there was no lack of comfortable chairs.

Somehow, despite the courteous words and attitude of Captain Carg, there was something about him that repelled confidence. Already Maud and Patsy were wondering if such a man could be loyal and true.

"My young master," he was saying, as he glanced at the letter he still held in his hand, "tells me that any questions you may ask I may answer as freely as I am permitted to."

"What does that mean, sir?" Maud inquired, for the speech was quite ambiguous.

"That I await your queries, Miss," with another perfunctory bow in her direction.

She hesitated, puzzled how to proceed.

"Mr. Jones is in a little trouble," she finally began. "He has been mistaken for some other man and--they have put him in jail until he can be examined by the federal judge of this district."

The captain's face exhibited no expression whatever. Even the eyes failed to express surprise at her startling news. He faced his visitors without emotion.

"At the examination," Maud went on, "it will be necessary for him to prove he is from Sangoa."

No reply. The captain sat like a statue.

"He must also prove that certain pearls found in his possession came from Sangoa."

Still no reply. Maud began to falter and fidget. Beth was amused. Patsy was fast growing indignant. Flo had a queer expression on her pretty face that denoted mischief to such an extent that it alarmed her Aunt Jane.

"I'm afraid," said Maud, "that unless you come to your master's assistance, Captain Carg, he will be sent to Austria, a prisoner charged with a serious crime."

She meant this assertion to be very impressive, but it did not seem to affect the man in the least. She sighed, and Flo, with a giggle, broke an awkward pause.

"Well, why don't you get busy. Maud?" she asked.

"I--in what way, Flo?" asked her sister, catching at the suggestion implied.

"Captain Carg would make a splendid motion picture actor," declared the younger Miss Stanton, audaciously. "He sticks close to his cues, you see, and won't move till he gets one. He will answer your questions; yes, he has said he would; but you may prattle until doomsday without effect, so far as he is concerned, unless you finish your speech with an interrogation point."

Mrs. Montrose gave a gasp of dismay, while Maud flushed painfully. The captain, however, allowed a gleam of admiration to soften his grim features as he stared fixedly at saucy Flo. Patsy marked this fleeting change of expression at once and said hastily:

"I think. Maud, dear, the captain is waiting to be questioned."

At this he cast a grateful look in Miss Doyle's direction and bowed to her. Maud began to appreciate the peculiar situation and marshalled her questions in orderly array.

"Tell me, please, where is Sangoa?" she began.

"In the South Seas, Miss."

"Will you give me the latitude and longitude?"

"I cannot."

"Oh, you mean that you will not?"

"I have been commanded to forget the latitude and longitude of Sangoa."

"But this is folly!" she exclaimed, much annoyed. "Such absurd reticence may be fatal to Mr. Jones' interests."

He made no reply to this and after reflection she tried again.

"What is the nearest land to Sangoa?"

"Toerdal," said he.

"What is that, an island?"

"Yes."

"Is it on the maps? Is it charted?"

"No, Miss."

She silenced Flo's aggravating giggle with a frown.

"Tell me, sir," she continued, "what is the nearest land to Sangoa that is known to the world?"

He smiled faintly as he replied: "I cannot tell."

Uncle John had grown very uneasy by this time and he decided he ought to attempt to assist Maud. So, addressing Captain Carg, he said in a positive tone:

"We quite understand, sir, that it has been the policy of the owners of Sangoa to guard all knowledge of the island's whereabouts from the outside world, as well as the fact that its pearl fisheries are very rich. We understand that an influx of treasure-seekers would embarrass the Sangoans. But we are close friends of young Mr. Jones and have no desire to usurp his island kingdom or seize his pearls. Our only anxiety is to free him from an unjust suspicion. A foolish man named Le Drieux accuses Jones of stealing a choice collection of pearls from a lady in Austria and fleeing with them to America. He has a photograph of the real criminal, taken abroad, which curiously resembles your young master."

Here the captain turned a quick look upon the speaker and for the first time his eyes lost their dull expression. But he made no remark and Uncle John continued:

"This man Le Drieux found several choice pearls in the possession of Mr. Jones, which he claims are a part of the stolen collection. Hence he obtained your master's arrest. Jones says he brought the pearls from Sangoa, his home, where they were found. No one here knows anything of Sangoa, so they regard his story

with suspicion. Now, sir, we believe that through you we can prove he has told the truth, and so secure his release. Here is the important question: Will you help us?"

"Willingly, sir," replied the captain.

"Are you forbidden to tell us where Sangoa is, or anything about the island?"

"Yes, sir; I am forbidden to do that, under any circumstances," was the ready answer.

"Have you been to Sangoa since you landed Mr. Jones in San Francisco, some fifteen months ago?"

"Yes, sir."

"And did you bring back with you, on this trip, any pearls?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you already disposed of them?"

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"I am awaiting orders from my master."

"Has he been aboard since you anchored here?"

"No, sir."

"What were your instructions?"

"To anchor on this coast and await his coming."

"Well," said Mr. Merrick, reflectively, "I believe you can prove our case without telling the location of Sangoa. An exhibition of the pearls you have brought ought to convince any reasonable judge. Are there many of them in this lot?"

"Not so many as usual, sir."

"Are they very choice ones?"

"Not so choice as usual, sir."

Uncle John was greatly disappointed, but Maud exclaimed eagerly:

"Let us see them, please!"

That was not a question, but the captain rose at once, bowed and left the cabin. It was some ten minutes before he returned, followed by two men who bore between them a heavy bronze chest which they placed upon the cabin floor. Then they left the room and the captain took a key from his pocket and unlocked a secret panel in the wainscoting of the cabin. A small compartment was disclosed, in which hung another key on an iron hook. He removed this and with it unlocked the chest, drawing from its recesses several trays which he deposited upon the table. These trays were lined and padded with white velvet and when the covers were removed, the girls, who had crowded around the table, uttered cries of astonishment and delight.

"They may not be as numerous or as choice 'as usual,'" murmured Mrs. Montrose, "but they are the most amazing lot of pearls I have ever beheld."

"And did all these come from Sangoa?" Maud asked the captain.

"They represent two months' fishing on the coast of our island," he replied; "but not the best two months of the year. The weather was bad; there were many storms."

"Why, the pearls that Ajo gave us were insignificant when compared with these!" cried Beth. "This collection must be worth an enormous sum. Uncle John."

Uncle John merely nodded. He had been thinking, as he studied the pearls, and now turned to Captain Carg.

"Will you come ashore and testify before the judge in behalf of your master?"

"Yes, if he asks me to do so."

"And will you bring these pearls with you?"

"If my master orders it."

"Very good. We will have him send you instructions."

The captain bowed, after which he turned to the table and began replacing the trays in the chest. Then he locked it, again hung the key in the secret aperture and closed the panel. A whistle summoned the two seamen, who bore away the chest, accompanied by the captain in person.

When they were left alone, Maud said anxiously:

"Is there anything more we can do here?"

"I think not," replied Mr. Merrick.

"Then let us get back. I want to complete my evidence at once, for no one knows when the judge will summon Ajo for examination."

They thanked the captain when he rejoined them, but he remained as silent and undemonstrative as ever, so they took their departure without further ceremony and returned to the shore.

CHAPTER XXIII - THE ADVANTAGE OF A DAY

That evening Le Drieux appeared in the lobby of the hotel and sat himself comfortably down, as if his sole desire in life was to read the evening paper and smoke his after-dinner cigar. He cast a self-satisfied and rather supercilious glance in the direction of the Merrick party, which on this occasion included the Stantons and their aunt, but he made no attempt to approach the corner where they were seated.

Maud, however, as soon as she saw Le Drieux, asked Arthur Weldon to interview the man and endeavor to obtain from him the exact date when Jack Andrews landed in New York. Uncle John had already wired to Major Doyle, Patsy's father, to get the steamship lists and find which boat Andrews had come on and the date of its arrival, but no answer had as yet been received.

Arthur made a pretext of buying a cigar at the counter and then strolled aimlessly about until he came, as if by chance, near to where Le Drieux was sitting. Making a pretense of suddenly observing the man, he remarked casually:

"Ah, good evening."

"Good evening, Mr. Weldon," replied Le Drieux, a note of ill-suppressed triumph in his voice.

"I suppose you are now content to rest on your laurels, pending the formal examination?" said Arthur.

"I am, sir. But the examination is a mere form, you know. I have already cabled the commissioner of police at Vienna and received a reply stating that the Austrian ambassador would make a prompt demand for extradition and the papers would be forwarded from Washington to the Austrian consul located in this city. The consul has also been instructed to render me aid in transporting the prisoner to Vienna. All this will require several days' time, so you see we are in no hurry to conclude the examination."

"I see." said Arthur. "Is it, then, your intention to accompany the prisoner to Vienna?"

"Of course. I have not mentioned the fact to you before, but I hold a commission from the Chief of Police of Vienna authorizing me to arrest Jack Andrews wherever I may find him, and deliver him up for trial. My firm procured for me this commission, as they are very anxious to recover the lost pearls."

"Why?"

"Well, to be frank, sir, the countess still owes our firm a large sum for purchases. She had almost her entire fortune tied up in that collection, and unless it is recovered--."

"I can well appreciate the anxiety of your firm. But aside from that, Mr. Le Drieux, I suppose a big reward has been offered?"

"Not big; just a fair amount. It will repay me, quite handsomely, for my trouble in this affair; but, of course, my firm gets half of the reward."

"They are not too generous. You deserve it all."

"Thank you. It has been an interesting episode, Mr. Weldon."

"It has been more than that. I consider this escapade of Andrews quite a romance; or is it more of a tragedy, in your opinion?"

"It will be a tragedy for Andrews, before he's through with it," replied Le Drieux grimly. "They're pretty severe on the long-fingered gentry, over there in Europe, and you must remember that if the fellow lives through the sentence they will undoubtedly impose upon him in Vienna, he has still to answer for the Paris robbery and the London murder. It's all up with Andrews, I guess; and it's a good thing, too, for he is too clever to remain at large."

"I do not consider him so clever as his captor," said Arthur smoothly. "It did not take you long to discover where he had hidden. Why, he has only returned to America about fifteen months ago."

"Eleven months ago--even less than that, I think," retorted Le Drieux, with much pride. "Let me see," taking out a notebook, "Andrews landed from the Princess Irene on the twenty-seventh of January last."

"Oh, the twenty-seventh? Are you sure of that?" said Arthur.

"Of course."

"I was under the impression he landed on the twenty-fifth."

"No; you are wrong. Why, I met the boat myself, but missed him, although he was on the passenger list. He disembarked very slyly, I afterward learned, being doubtless afraid he would be arrested. But at that time I had no positive evidence against him."

Arthur asked a few more questions of no importance and then bade Le Drieux good night and rejoined the girls.

"You win, Maud," he remarked as he sat down. "That clew of yours was an inspiration. Andrews arrived in America on January twenty-seventh, just one day

after Jones had a motion picture of himself taken at the stockholders' meeting of the Continental Film Company."

"Then we needn't worry over Ajo any longer!" asserted Patsy joyfully. "With this evidence and the testimony of Captain Carg and his pearls, the most stupid judge on earth would declare the boy innocent. Why, Beth, we shall get our theatres built, after all!"

CHAPTER XXIV - PICTURE NUMBER NINETEEN

"Well, where have you been?" demanded Goldstein gruffly, as Maud Stanton entered his office the next morning in response to a summons from the Continental manager. "What made you run away yesterday? Don't you know such things make us lots of trouble and cost us money?"

"I'm not worrying about that," replied Maud, as she composedly sat down opposite the manager.

Goldstein glared at her, but he was cautious.

"You're a fine actress, Miss Stanton, and you're popular on the films," he said, "but if you cannot attend to business we are paying you too much money."

"Indeed!"

"No other firm could afford to give you so much, you know that; and the only reason we are so extravagant is because you are one of our features."

"Am I to take this as a dismissal?" she asked carelessly.

"Dismissal!" he cried, holding up his hands. "Of course not. Who is talking of dismissal? But I owe a duty to my firm. Such actions as yours, in running away from rehearsals, must have a--a--reprimand. Not severe; I am not so angry as grieved; but a reprimand is your due--and that fly-away sister of yours is just as bad."

"We went to assist your president--Mr. Jones--to establish his innocence of the awful charge made against him," she explained.

"Bah. You can't do that. No one can save him," he replied, with triumph and satisfaction mingled in his tone.

She looked at him thoughtfully.

"You seem pleased with the idea that he is guilty, Mr. Goldstein."

"I am glad he is caught. What is Jones to me? An interloper! A boy who gets money, buys stock, and then interferes with a business he knows nothing about. You are a professional, Miss Stanton. You know how we, who are in the game, have won our knowledge of it by long experience, by careful study, by keeping the thousand threads of the rope of success twisted tightly together. Any fool could buy this business, but only an expert could run it successfully. You know that. So I am glad this interfering boy is wiped off the slate forever."

"But he isn't!" she protested. "You still have this boy to reckon with, Goldstein. When he is examined by the judge he will be set free, for all the evidence is in his favor and there is ample proof that he is not the man they are after. And that reminds me. There is a negative here that was made at the directors' meeting in January, a year ago, which shows Mr. Jones taking control of the Continental."

"I have never seen it," he said, shaking his head.

"It is here, though, and I want a positive printed at once, and mounted on a reel, so it can be exhibited before the judge. Have Alfred get it out of the vault."

"Why should I do that?" he inquired, frowning.

"Because, if you refuse, Mr. Jones is quite likely to find another manager. No other firm would pay you so much as you are getting here. You know that."

He grinned with delight at the thrust, then grew solemn.

"You are sure he will go free?"

"Positive," returned Maud. "He doesn't really need that film, but it would be good policy--excellent policy--for you to produce it."

"Alfred!" called the manager. "Bring me the stock book."

He ran his finger down the pages.

"January--eh--eh--"

"January twenty-sixth," she said.

"Here it is: 'Special of Annual Meeting, C.F.M. Co.--280 feet.--No. 19,' Get number nineteen out of the vault, Alfred."

While the young man was gone he relapsed into thought. Maud waited patiently.

"You see," resumed the manager abruptly, "I am making more money for the Continental than I get paid for. That is because I know how. It is not good business to cut down the profits; therefore I should be paid a bigger salary. Miss Stanton, you're a friend of young Jones, who controls this company. You might talk to him about me."

"I will," she said.

"You might say I know every trick of the trade. Tell Jones how all the other film makers are crazy to get me. But say how I refuse more money because I believe our directors will wake up to my value and raise my salary. That sounds pretty good, eh?"

"It sounds remarkable."

"And it's no dream. Ah, here comes Alfred."

The clerk laid upon the table a round box coated with paraffin to exclude the air. A tag was attached to the box, describing its contents.

"Number nineteen. Quite right. Take it to the printing room and tell McDonald to make me a copy as quickly as possible. Tell him to let me know when it's dry and ready to run."

As the clerk disappeared Maud said:

"I needn't wait, I suppose?"

"No. Werner wants you at the rehearsal of 'The Love of a Princess.' Before you go home to-night I'll call you in to see the run of number nineteen. Then you may take the film to Jones--with my compliments."

At five o'clock, when she was dressing to go home, Maud was summoned to the little "dark room" where all films are exhibited, trimmed and tested before being sent out. She took Aunt Jane and Flo with her and they found Goldstein already waiting and the operator standing by his machine.

The scene was short and not very exciting, although of interest in the present crisis. It showed the interior of the hall where the stock-holders' meeting was held, and began with the assembling of the members. Two or three pompous individuals then seated themselves facing the others, and the proceedings began. A slim boy on a back bench arose and said something. Panic was at once written on the faces of the former officers. They gesticulated; their lips moved rapidly. The boy, easily recognized as A. Jones, advanced and displayed a lot of papers, which were carefully examined. He then took the president's chair, the former officers fled in disgust and the throng of stockholders wildly applauded. Then the light went out, the machine stopped, and Goldstein opened the door to let in light and air.

"It was the same kid, all right," he remarked. "I had never seen this film run before, but it shows how Jones called the turn on the old officers in great shape. I wonder where he got all the money?"

Maud secured his promise to send an operator to town, to exhibit the film before the judge, whenever he might be required. Then she went to her hotel fully satisfied that she had done all in her power to assist A. Jones of Sangoa.

CHAPTER XXV - JUDGMENT

A telegram from Major Doyle corroborated Le Drieux's assertion that Jack Andrews had arrived at the port of New York via the Princess Irene on January twenty-seventh. A report from Lawyer Colby stated that he was now so thoroughly posted on everything pertaining to pearls that he could easily confound the expert, Mr. Isidore Le Drieux. There the matter rested for three days, during which the Stanton girls continued their work at the studio and Uncle John's nieces busied themselves enjoying the charms of the ideal Hollywood climate. Then came the news that the judge would call Jones for examination at nine o'clock on Friday morning, the thirteenth.

"Friday, the thirteenth!" said Patsy with a grimace. "I hope Ajo isn't superstitious."

"That combination proves lucky for some people," replied Arthur, laughing. "Let us hope that Jones is one of them."

"Of course we shall all go to see what happens," said Beth, and to this there was no dissenting voice.

Maud obtained a letter from Jones to Captain Carg, asking him to be on hand, and this she dispatched by a safe messenger to the yacht Arabella. She also told Goldstein to have his operator in attendance with the film. Finally, a conference was called that evening with Mr. Colby, at which the complete program of defense was carefully rehearsed.

"Really," said the lawyer, "there's nothing to this case. It's a regular walkaway, believe me! I'm almost ashamed to take Mr. Jones' money for conducting a case that Miss Stanton has all cut and dried for me. I'll not receive one half the credit I should had the thing been complicated, or difficult. However, I've learned so much about pearls that I'm almost tempted to go into the jewelry business."

Friday morning was bright and cool--one of those perfect days for which Southern California is famous. Judge Wilton appeared in court with a tranquil expression upon his face that proved he was in a contented mood. All conditions augured well for the prisoner.

The prosecution was represented by two well known attorneys who had brought a dozen witnesses to support their charge, among them being the Austrian consul. The case opened with the statement that the prisoner, Jackson Dowd Andrews, alias A. Jones, while a guest at the villa of the Countess Ahmberg, near Vienna, had stolen from his hostess a valuable collection of pearls, which he had secretly brought to America. Some of the stolen booty the prisoner had disposed of, it was

asserted; a part had been found in his possession at the time of his arrest; some of the pearls had been mounted by Brock & Co., the Los Angeles jewelers, at his request, and by him presented to several acquaintances he had recently made but who were innocent of any knowledge of his past history or his misdeeds. Therefore the prosecution demanded that the prisoner be kept in custody until the arrival of extradition papers, which were already on the way, and that on the arrival of these papers Andrews should be turned over to Le Drieux, a representative of the Vienna police, and by him taken to Austria, the scene of his crime, for trial and punishment.

The judge followed the charge of the prosecution rather indifferently, being already familiar with it. Then he asked if there was any defense.

Colby took the floor. He denied that the prisoner was Jackson Dowd Andrews, or that he had ever been in Vienna. It was a case of mistaken identity. His client's liberty had been outraged by the stupid blunders of the prosecution. He demanded the immediate release of the prisoner.

"Have you evidence to support this plea?" inquired Judge Wilton.

"We have, your honor. But the prosecution must first prove its charge."

The prosecution promptly responded to the challenge. The photograph of Andrews, taken abroad, was shown. Two recognized experts in physiognomy declared, after comparison, that it was undoubtedly the photograph of the prisoner. Then Le Drieux took the stand. He read a newspaper account of the robbery. He produced a list of the pearls, attested by the countess herself. Each individual pearl was described and its color, weight and value given. Then Le Drieux exhibited the pearls taken from Jones and, except for the small ones in the brooch which had been presented to Mrs. Montrose, he checked off every pearl against his list, weighing them before the judge and describing their color.

During this, Judge Wilton continually nodded approval. Such evidence was concise and indisputable, it seemed. Moreover, the defense readily admitted that the pearls exhibited had all been in Jones' possession.

Then Colby got up to refute the evidence.

"Mr. Jones," he began, "has--"

"Give the prisoner's full name," said the judge.

"His full name is A. Jones."

"What does the 'A' stand for?"

"It is only an initial, your honor. Mr. Jones has no other name."

"Puh! He ought to have taken some other name. Names are cheap," sneered the judge.

Colby ignored the point.

"Mr. Jones is a resident of Sangoa, where he was born. Until he landed at San Francisco, fifteen months ago, he had never set foot on any land but that of his native island."

"Where is Sangoa?" demanded the judge.

"It is an island of the South Seas."

"What nationality?"

"It is independent. It was purchased from Uruguay by Mr. Jones' father many years ago, and now belongs exclusively to his son."

"Your information is indefinite," snapped the judge.

"I realize that, your honor; but my client deems it wise to keep the location of his island a secret, because he has valuable pearl fisheries on its shores. The pearls exhibited by the prosecution were all found at Sangoa."

"How do you account, then, for their checking so accurately against the list of stolen pearls?"

"I can make almost any pearls check with that list, which represents a huge collection of almost every size, weight and color," replied Colby. "To prove this, I will introduce in evidence Captain Carg of Sangoa, who recently arrived at Santa Monica Bay with the last proceeds of the pearl fisheries of the island."

Captain Carg was on hand, with his two sailors guarding the chest. He now produced the trays of pearls and spread them on the desk before the amazed eyes of the judge. Le Drieux was astounded, and showed it plainly on his face.

Colby now borrowed the list, and picking up a pearl from the tray weighed it on Le Drieux's scales and then found a parallel to it on the list. This he did with several of the pearls, chosen at random, until one of Le Drieux's attorneys took the expert aside and whispered to him. Then Le Drieux's expression changed from chagrin to joy and coming forward he exclaimed:

"Your honor, this is the collection--the balance of it--which was stolen from the Countess Ahmberg!"

The judge looked at him a moment, leaned back in his chair and nodded his head impressively.

"What nonsense!" protested Colby. "These trays contain twice the number of pearls included in that entire list, as your honor may plainly see."

"Of course," retorted Le Drieux eagerly; "here are also the pearls from the necklace of Princess Lemoine, and the London collection of Lady Grandison. Your honor, in his audacity the defense has furnished us proof positive that this prisoner can be none other than the adventurer and clever thief, Jack Andrews."

It was in vain that Colby declared these pearls had just come from Sangoa, where they were found. The judge cut him short and asked if he had any other evidence to advance.

"These pearls," he added, indicating the trays, "I shall take possession of. They must remain in my custody until their owners claim them, or Captain Carg can prove they are the lawful property of the prisoner."

Consternation now pervaded the ranks of the defense. The girls were absolutely dismayed, while Uncle John and Arthur Weldon wore bewildered looks. Only Jones remained composed, an amused smile curling the corners of his delicate mouth as he eyed the judge who was to decide his fate.

On the side of the prosecution were looks of triumph. Le Drieux already regarded his case as won.

Colby now played his trump card, which Maud Stanton's logic and energy had supplied the defense.

"The prosecution," said he, "has stated that the alleged robbery was committed at Vienna on the evening of September fifteenth, and that Jack Andrews arrived in America on the steamship Princess Irene on the afternoon of the January twenty-seventh following. Am I correct in those dates?"

The judge consulted his stenographer.

"The dates mentioned are correct," he said pompously.

"Here are the papers issued by the Commander of the Port of San Francisco, proving that the yacht Arabella of Sangoa anchored in that harbor on October twelfth, and disembarked one passenger, namely: A. Jones of Sangoa."

"That might, or might not, have been the prisoner," declared the prosecuting attorney.

"True," said the judge. "The name 'A. Jones' is neither distinguished nor distinguishing."

"On the evening of January twenty-sixth, twenty-four hours before Jack Andrews landed in America," continued Colby, "the prisoner, Mr. A. Jones, appeared at the

annual meeting of the stockholders of the Continental Film Manufacturing Company, in New York, and was formally elected president of that organization."

"What is your proof?" inquired the judge, stifling a yawn.

"I beg to submit the minutes of the meeting, attested by its secretary."

The judge glanced at the minutes.

"We object to this evidence," said the opposing attorney. "There is no proof that the A. Jones referred to is the prisoner."

"The minutes," said Colby, "state that a motion picture was taken of the meeting. I have the film here, in this room, and beg permission to exhibit it before your honor as evidence."

The judge was a bit startled at so novel a suggestion but assented with a nod. In a twinkling the operator had suspended a roller-screen from the chandelier dependent from the ceiling, pulled down the window shades and attached his projecting machine to an electric-light socket.

Then the picture flashed upon the screen. It was not entirely distinct, because the room could not be fully darkened and the current was not strong, yet every face in the gathering of stockholders could be plainly recognized. Jones, especially, as the central figure, could not be mistaken and no one who looked upon the picture could doubt his identity.

When the exhibition was concluded and the room again lightened, Le Drieux's face was visibly perturbed and anxious, while his attorneys sat glum and disconcerted.

Colby now put Goldstein on the stand, who testified that he recognized Jones as president of his company and the owner of the majority of stock. The young man had come to him with unimpeachable credentials to that effect.

The girls were now smiling and cheerful. To them the defense was absolutely convincing. But Le Drieux's attorneys were skillful fighters and did not relish defeat. They advanced the theory that the motion picture, just shown, had been made at a later date and substituted for the one mentioned in the minutes of the meeting. They questioned Goldstein, who admitted that he had never seen Jones until a few days previous. The manager denied, however, any substitution of the picture. He was not a very satisfactory witness for the defense and Colby was sorry he had summoned him.

As for the judge, he seemed to accept the idea of the substitution with alacrity. He had practically decided against Jones in the matter of the pearls. Now he listened

carefully to the arguments of the prosecution and cut Colby short when he raised objections to their sophistry.

Finally Judge Wilton rose to state his decision.

"The evidence submitted in proof of the alleged fact that the prisoner is Jack Andrews, and that Jack Andrews may have robbed the Countess Ahmberg, of Vienna, of her valuable collection of pearls, is in the judgment of this court clear and convincing," he said. "The lawyer for the defense has further succeeded in entangling his client by exhibiting an additional assortment of pearls, which may likewise be stolen property. The attempt to impose upon this court a mythical island called Sangoa is--eh--distinctly reprehensible. This court is not so easily hoodwinked. Therefore, in consideration of the evidence advanced, I declare that the prisoner is Jack Andrews, otherwise Jackson Dowd Andrews, otherwise parading under the alias of 'A. Jones,' and I recognize the claim of the Austrian police to his person, that he may be legally tried for his alleged crimes in the territory where it is alleged he committed them. Therefore I order that the prisoner be held for requisition and turned over to the proper authorities when the papers arrive. The court is adjourned."

CHAPTER XXVI - SUNSHINE AFTER RAIN

Of course not one of our friends agreed with the judge. Indignation and resentment were written on every face--except that of Goldstein. The manager rubbed his hands softly together and, approaching Maud, he whispered:

"You needn't speak to Jones about me. It's all right. I guess he won't be interfering with me any more, eh? And come early to-morrow morning. We've got a lot of rehearsing to do. To-day I will call a holiday for you. And, believe me, Miss Stanton, this is nothing to worry any of us. The judge settles it, right or wrong, for the law defies us all."

As the manager hurried away Uncle John looked after him and said:

"I wonder if he realizes how true his words are? 'The law defies us all.' How helpless we are to oppose injustice and oppression when one man, with a man's limitations and prejudices, is clothed with authority to condemn us!"

Colby stood silent. The poor fellow's eyes were full of unshed tears.

"This is my first case, and my last," said he. "I won it honestly. It was the judge, not the evidence, that defeated me. I'm going to rent my office and apply for a job as a chauffeur."

Jones was the least affected of the group. "Never mind, friends," he said to them, "it will all come right in the end. If you will stand by me, Colby, I'll retain you to plead my case in the Austrian court, or at least advise my Austrian lawyers. I've an idea they will treat me fairly, over there in Vienna."

"It's outrageous!" quoth indignant Patsy Doyle. "I'd like to give that judge a piece of my mind."

"If you did," replied Arthur, "he'd fine you for contempt."

"It would be a just line, in that case," said Patsy; "so I'm sure he wouldn't do it."

The jailer had come to take the prisoner back to his cell. He smiled whimsically at Miss Doyle's speech and remarked:

"There's always one side to kick, Miss, whichever way the judge decides. It was only Solomon who could satisfy everybody."

"Clear the room!" shouted the bailiff.

Captain Carg's men took the empty chest back to the launch. The captain followed them, after pressing the hand of his young master, who said: "Wait for orders, Captain." Uncle John took his flock back to the hotel, where they gathered in his room and held an indignation meeting. Here it was safe to give full vent to their chagrin and disappointment.

"Every bit of honest evidence was on our side," declared Maud. "I shall never be able to understand why we lost."

"Bribery and corruption," said Flo. "I'll bet a cookie Le Drieux divided the reward with the judge."

"I suppose it's all up with Ajo now," sighed Beth, regretfully.

"Yes," replied Colby, who had accompanied them; "there is nothing more to be done for him at present. From the judge's order there is no appeal, in such a case. Mr. Jones must go to Vienna for trial; but there he may secure an acquittal."

"He is very brave, I think," said Patsy. "This affair must have hurt his pride, but he smiles through it all. In his condition of health, the confinement and humiliation may well shorten his life, yet he has made no murmur."

"He's good stuff, that boy," commented Uncle John. "Perhaps it is due to that John Paul blood his father was so proud of."

When Arthur went into the lobby a little later he found Le Drieux seated comfortably and smoking a long cigar. The pearl expert nodded to the young ranchman with so much evident satisfaction that Arthur could not resist engaging him in conversation.

"Well, you won," he remarked, taking a vacant chair beside Le Drieux.

"Yes, of course," was the reply; "but I'll admit that fellow Andrews is a smooth one. Why, at one time he had even me puzzled with his alibis and his evidence. That flash of the pearls was the cleverest trick I ever heard of; but it didn't go, I'd warned the judge to look out for a scoop. He knew he was dealing with one of the most slippery rogues in captivity."

"See here, Le Drieux," said Arthur; "let us be honest with one another, now that the thing is settled and diplomacy is uncalled for. Do you really believe that Jones is Jack Andrews?"

"Me? I know it, Mr. Weldon. I don't pose as a detective, but I'm considered to have a shrewd insight into human character, and from the first moment I set eyes on him I was positive that Jones was the famous Jack Andrews. I can understand how you people, generous and trusting, have been deceived in the fellow; I admire

the grit you've all shown in standing by him to the last. I haven't a particle of malice toward any one of you, I assure you--not even toward Andrews himself."

"Then why have you bounded him so persistently?"

"For two reasons." said Le Drieux. "As a noted pearl expert, I wanted to prove my ability to run down the thief; and, as a man in modest circumstances, I wanted the reward."

"How much will you get?"

"All together, the rewards aggregate twenty thousand dollars. I'll get half, and my firm will get half."

"I think," said Arthur, to test the man, "that Jones would have paid you double that amount to let him alone."

Le Drieux shook his head; then he smiled.

"I don't mind telling you, Mr. Weldon--in strict confidence, of course--that I approached Jones on that very subject, the day he was placed in jail. He must have been sure his tricks would clear him, for he refused to give me a single penny. I imagine he is very sorry, right now; don't you, sir?"

"No," said Arthur, "I don't. I still believe in his innocence."

Le Drieux stared at him incredulously.

"What, after that examination of to-day?" he demanded.

"Before and after. There was no justice in the decision of Judge Wilton; he was unduly prejudiced."

"Be careful, sir!"

"We are talking confidentially."

"To be sure. But you astonish me. I understand the character of Andrews so thoroughly that I fail to comprehend how any sensible person can believe in him. Talk about prejudice!"

"I suppose you are to remain at this hotel?" said Arthur, evading further argument.

"Yes, until the papers arrive. They ought to be here by Monday. Then I shall take Andrews to New York and we will board the first steamer for Europe."

Arthur left him. Le Drieux puzzled him more than he puzzled Le Drieux. The expert seemed sincere in the belief that he had trapped, in Jones, a noted

criminal. Weldon could not help wondering, as he walked away, if possibly he and his friends had been deceived in A. Jones of Sangoa. The doubt was but momentary, yet it had forced itself into his mind.

On Saturday afternoon they all made a visit to the prisoner and tried to cheer him. Again on Sunday they called--the Stantons and Merricks and Weldons and all. Young Jones received them with composure and begged them not to worry on his account.

"I am quite comfortable in this jail, I assure you," said he. "On my journey to Vienna I shall be able to bribe Le Drieux to let me have such comforts as I desire. There is but one experience I shrink from: the passage across the Atlantic. If it brings a return of my former malady I shall suffer terribly."

"It may not be so bad as you fear," Patsy assured him, although in her heart she realized it might be the death of the boy. "Often those who are distressed by a voyage on the Pacific endure the Atlantic very well."

"That is encouraging," said he. "It is my dread of the water that has prevented me from returning to Sangoa, or even visiting my yacht. And this reminds me of a favor I wish to ask."

"You may rely upon our friendship," said Maud.

"I believe that. Here is a letter to Captain Carg, putting the Arabella at your disposal until my return from Vienna. I have named Mr. Merrick as the commander of the yacht, in my absence, and if you feel inclined to make the trip and can spare the time I would like you all to make a voyage to Sangoa."

"To Sangoa!" they cried in chorus.

"Yes. I am ambitious to prove to you, who have been my staunch friends, that the island is indeed there. Incidentally you will become acquainted with the prettiest place in all the world. My house will be at your disposal while you remain and I am sure you will find it fairly comfortable."

They were so amazed at this proposition that at first no one found words to answer the boy. It was Flo, naturally, who first collected her thoughts.

"It will be awfully jolly!" she cried, clapping her hands with delight. "I'm sure Maud and I need a vacation. Let's stick up our noses at Goldstein and sail away to the mysterious isle. What do you say, girls? And you, Mr. Merrick?"

"I believe, my boy," said Uncle John, laying a kindly hand on the youth's shoulder, "that all of us are inclined to take advantage of your offer. That is, if you are sure we can be of no further use to you in your difficulties."

"I am taking Colby abroad with me and he can do all that may be done until after my trial. Then I hope to rejoin you here and am looking forward to a jolly reunion."

Uncle John took the letters which Ajo had written to Captain Carg, to his superintendent in Sangoa and to his housekeeper. Then they all pressed the boy's hand and went away.

* * * * *

Monday morning the extradition papers arrived. Le Drieux exhibited them proudly to young Weldon, to Mr. Merrick, and even to the girls, who regarded the documents with shuddering awe.

"We'll take the night train," said the man. "That will get us to New York on Friday, in time to catch the Saturday steamer for Calais."

As he spoke a boy approached and handed Le Drieux a telegram.

"Excuse me," said he, and opened it with an important flourish. The next moment his face fell. He staggered and sank half fainting into a chair which Mr. Merrick pushed toward him.

Patsy ran for some water. Maud Stanton fanned the man with a folded newspaper. Arthur Weldon picked up the telegram which had fluttered from Le Drieux's grasp and deliberately read it. Then he, too, sank gasping into a chair.

"Listen, girls!" he cried, his voice shrill with emotion. "What do you think of this?"

"'Jack Andrews arrested here in New York to-day by Burns detectives. Countess Ahmberg's collection of pearls was found in his possession, intact. Return here first train.'

"Signed: 'Eckstrom & Co.'"

There was a moment of tense silence.

Flo clapped her hands.

"Come on," she shouted in glee, "let's go and tell Ajo!"