

BAUM LYMAN FRANK

AUNT JANE'S NIECES OUT
WEST

Лаймен Фрэнк Баум

Aunt Jane's Nieces out West

«Public Domain»

Баум Л.

Aunt Jane's Nieces out West / Л. Баум — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	12
CHAPTER IV	15
CHAPTER V	19
CHAPTER VI	24
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	26

L. Frank Baum

Aunt Jane's Nieces out West

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 be 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 swiftiness. 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."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.