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."