

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.