

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 swiftness. Bathers were scattered thickly along the coast, but only a few had ventured far out beyond the life-lines, so Patsy naturally sought an explanation by gazing at those farthest out. At first she was puzzled, for all the venturesome seemed to be swimming strongly and composedly; but presently a dark form showed on the crest of a wave--a struggling form that tossed up its arms despairingly and then

disappeared.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Their adventure had now been noticed by some of the bathers, who crowded forward to meet the boat as it grounded on the beach. Uncle John, always keeping an eye on his beloved nieces, had noted every detail of the

rescue and as a dozen strong men pulled the boat across the sands, beyond the reach of the surf, the Merrick automobile rolled up beside it.

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

"The hospital?" said Patsy, nodding approval.

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

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

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

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

"Who was it, Patsy?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Well--Uncle John?"

"I think he will live," returned the little man, with an air of great satisfaction. "Anyway, he's alive and breathing now, and the doctors say there's every reason to expect a rapid recovery."

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

"A. Jones."

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

"Jones. A. Jones."

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

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

"Where is Sangoa?" inquired Beth.

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

ago, and carried it away with him, so we have no clue to the boy's dwelling place."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Never mind that," said Maud, flushing prettily with embarrassment as all eyes turned upon her, "I'm glad I noticed him in time; but now that he is

all right he need never know who it was that rescued him. And, for that matter, sir, Patsy Doyle and Mr. Weldon did as much for him as I. Perhaps they saved us both, while your promptness in getting him to the hospital was the main factor in saving his life."

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

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

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

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

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

This little event, in conjunction with the afternoon's adventure, made them all more intimate, so that when they finally reached home and

separated for the night they felt like old friends rather than recent acquaintances.