

CHAPTER XI

A DAMSEL IN DISTRESS

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Please take my card to Mr. Goldstein."

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

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

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

The manager ushered them into his office, a big room with a busy aspect. At one end were two or three girls industriously thumping typewriters; McNeil, the producer, was sorting manuscript on Goldstein's own desk; a young man who served as the manager's private secretary was poring over a voluminous record-book, wherein were listed all the films ever made by the manufacturers of the world. On a sofa in a far corner reclined the injured "star" of the company, Maud Stanton, who--being half asleep at the moment--did not notice the entrance of her sister and young Jones.

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

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

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

"Well?" he demanded, impatiently.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Quite right, Goldstein," remarked young Jones, in his quiet voice.

"You've carried your point and maintained discipline. I like that. Miss Flo Stanton will do exactly what you request her to do. But you're going to change your mind and think better of her protest. I'm almost sure, Goldstein, from the expression of your face, that you intend to issue prompt orders that another girl must take her place."

Goldstein looked at him steadily a moment and the arrogant expression

changed to one of meek subservience.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, Mr. Jones!" he exclaimed; "that's impossible; it wouldn't do at

all! We've been rehearsing this play and preparing for its production for the last two weeks, and to-day all our actors and assistants are here and ready to make the picture. I've already postponed it four hours--until this afternoon--to favor Miss Stanton, but, really--"

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

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

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

"Very well. Incur the expense, Goldstein."

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

McNeil rose and faced the manager.

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

Goldstein was glad to vent his chagrin on the producer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, no," she returned, laughing at the idea. "We have signed contracts waiving any damages for injuries sustained while at work on the premises. We all have to do that, you know, because the business is hazardous at its best. On the other hand, Mr. Goldstein has a physician and surgeon always within call, in case of accident, and the service is quite free to all the employees."

He nodded.

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

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

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

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

"How about Miss Flo?" asked the boy.

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

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

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

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

"Thank you, sir."