

CHAPTER XII

PICTURES, GIRLS AND NONSENSE

"Well, Aunt Jane," said Maud Stanton, when their car was rolling toward the hotel and the girl had related the remarkable interview in the office, "what do you think of Ajo now?"

"He is certainly an amazing young man," was the reply. "I cannot in any way figure out his connection with Goldstein, or his power over the man. The Continental Film Manufacturing Company is a great corporation, with headquarters in New York, and Mr. Goldstein is the authorized head and manager of the concern on the Pacific coast. I understand his salary is ten thousand a year. On the other hand, young Jones has only been in this country for a year, coming from an insignificant island somewhere in the South Seas, where he was born and reared. Much of the time since he arrived in America he has been an invalid. Aside from this meager information, no one seems to know anything about him."

"Putting the case that way makes it all the more remarkable," observed Maud. "A big, experienced, important man, cowed by a mere boy. When Goldstein first met this callow, sallow youth, he trembled before him. When the boy enters the office of the great film company he dictates to the manager, who meekly obeys him. Remember, too, that A. Jones, by his interference, has caused a direct loss to the company, which Goldstein

will have to explain, as best he may, in his weekly report to the New York office. A more astonishing state of affairs could not be imagined, Aunt Jane!"

"The puzzle will solve itself presently," said the lady. "Abnormal conditions seldom last long."

Maud passed the day in bed, quietly reading a book. Her injury was really slight and with rest it mended rapidly. Patsy and Beth came in to see her and in the conversation that ensued the girls were told of the latest mystery surrounding A. Jones.

"It is surely queer!" admitted Miss Doyle, impressed and thoughtful.

"Uncle John and Arthur were saying this noon, at lunch, that Ajo was a helpless sort of individual and easily influenced by others--as witness his caving in to me when I opposed his doctor's treatment. Arthur thinks he has come to this country to squander what little money his father left him and that his public career outside the limits of his little island will be brief. Yet according to your story the boy is no weakling but has power and knows how to use it."

"He surely laid down the law to Goldstein," said Maud.

"He is very young," remarked Beth, ignoring the fact that she was herself no older, "and perhaps that is why we attach so much importance to his actions. A grown-up man is seldom astonishing, however eccentric he may

prove to be. In a boy we expect only boyishness, and young Jones has interested us because he is unique."

After a little the conversation drifted to motion pictures, for both Patsy and Beth were eager to learn all about the business details of film making, which Maud, by reason of her months of experience, was able to explain to them in a comprehensive manner. Flo came home toward evening, but had little more to tell them, as the day had passed very quietly at the "studio." Jones had remained closeted with the manager for a full hour, and it was remarked that after he had gone away Goldstein was somewhat subdued and performed his duties less aggressively than usual.

Maud's visitors now left her to dress for dinner, at which meal she was able to rejoin them, walking with a slight limp but otherwise recovered from her accident. To their surprise, young Jones appeared as they were entering the dining room and begged for a seat at their table. Uncle John at once ordered another place laid at the big round table, which accommodated the company of nine very nicely.

Ajo sat between Patsy and Maud and although he selected his dishes with some care he partook of all the courses from soup to dessert.

The morning interview with Goldstein was not mentioned. Ajo inquired about Maud's hurt but then changed the subject and conversed upon nearly everything but motion pictures. However, after they had repaired to the hotel lobby and were seated together in a cosy, informal group, Patsy

broached a project very near to her heart.

"Beth and I," said she, "have decided to build a Children's Picture Theatre."

"Where?" asked Uncle John, rather startled by the proposition.

"Here, or in Los Angeles," was the reply.

"You see," explained Beth, "there is a crying need for a place where children may go and see pictures that appeal especially to them and are, at the same time, quite proper for them to witness. A great educational field is to be opened by this venture, and Patsy and I would enjoy the work of creating the first picture theatre, exclusively for children, ever established in America."

"You may say, 'in the world,'" added Arthur. "I like this idea of yours, girls, and I hope you will carry it out."

"Oh, they'll carry it out, all right," remarked Uncle John. "I've been expecting something of this sort, ever since we came here. My girls, Mr. Jones," he said, turning to the young man, "are always doing some quaint thing, or indulging in some queer enterprise, for they're a restless lot. Before Louise married, she was usually in these skirmishes with fate, but now--"

"Oh, I shall join Patsy and Beth, of course," asserted Louise. "It will make it easier for all, to divide the expense between us, and I am as much interested in pictures as they are."

"Perhaps," said Patsy musingly, "we might build two theatres, in different parts of the city. There are so many children to be amused. And we intend to make the admission price five cents."

"Have you any idea what it costs to build one of these picture theatres?" asked Arthur.

"We're not going to build one of 'these' theatres," retorted Patsy. "Many of the dens I've been in cost scarcely anything, being mere shelters. The city is strewn with a lot of miserable, stuffy theatres that no one can enjoy sitting in, even to see a good picture. We have talked this over and decided to erect a new style of building, roomy and sanitary, with cushioned seats and plenty of broad aisles. There are one or two of this class already in Los Angeles, but we want to make our children's theatres a little better than the best."

"And the expense?"

"Well, it will cost money, of course. But it will be a great delight to the children--bless their little hearts!"

"This is really a business enterprise," added Beth gravely.

Uncle John chuckled with amusement.

"Have you figured out the profits?" he inquired.

"It really ought to pay, Uncle," declared Patsy, somewhat nettled by this flaccid reception of her pet scheme. "All the children will insist on being taken to a place like that, for we shall show just the pictures they love to see. And, allowing there is no money to be made from the venture, think of the joy we shall give to innumerable little ones!"

"Go ahead, my dears," said Uncle John, smiling approval. "And, if you girls find you haven't enough money to carry out your plans, come to me."

"Oh, thank you, Uncle!" exclaimed Beth. "But I feel sure we can manage the cost ourselves. We will build one of the theatres first, and if that is a success we will build others."

"But about those films, made especially for children," remarked Arthur.

"Where will you get them?"

"Why, there are lots of firms making films," replied Patsy. "We can select from all that are made the ones most suitable for our purpose."

"I fear you cannot do that," said Mrs. Montrose, who had listened with wonder to this conversation. "There are three combinations, or 'trusts,'

among the film makers, which are known as the Licensed, the Mutual and the Independents. If you purchase from one of these trusts, you cannot get films from the others, for that is their edict. Therefore you will have only about one-third of the films made to select from."

"I thought money would buy anything--in the way of merchandise," said Louise, half laughing and half indignant.

"Not from these film dictators," was the reply.

"They all make a few children's pictures," announced Maud Stanton. "Even the Continental turns out one occasionally. But there are not nearly enough, taken all together, to supply an exclusive children's theatre."

"Then we will have some made," declared Patsy. "We will order some fairy tales, such as the children like. They would be splendid in motion pictures."

"Some have already been made and exhibited," said Mrs. Montrose. "The various manufacturers have made films of the fairy tales of Hans Andersen, Frank Baum, Lewis Carroll and other well-known writers."

"And were they successful?"

"Quite so, I believe; but such films are seldom put out except at holiday time."

"I think, Beth," said Patsy to her cousin, in a businesslike tone, "that we must organize a company and make our own films. Then we can get exactly what we want."

"Oh, yes!" replied Beth, delighted with the suggestion. "And let us get Maud and Flo to act in our pictures. Won't it be exciting?"

"Pardon me, young ladies," said A. Jones, speaking for the first time since this subject had been broached. "Would it not be wise to consider the expense of making films, before you undertake it?"

Patsy looked at him inquiringly.

"Do you know what the things cost?" she asked.

"I've some idea," said he. "Feature films of fairy tales, such as you propose, cost at least two thousand dollars each to produce. You would need about three for each performance, and you will have to change your programmes at least once a week. That would mean an outlay of not less than six thousand dollars a week, which is doubtless more money than your five-cent theatre could take in."

This argument staggered the girls for a moment. Then Beth asked: "How do the ordinary theatres manage?"

"The ordinary theatre simply rents its pictures, paying about three hundred dollars a week for the service. There is a 'middleman,' called the 'Exchange,' whose business is to buy the films from the makers and rent them to the theatres. He pays a big price for a film, but is able to rent it to dozens of theatres, by turns, and by this method he not only gets back the money he has expended but makes a liberal profit."

"Well," said Patsy, not to be baffled, "we could sell several copies of our films to these middlemen, and so reduce the expense of making them for our use."

"The middleman won't buy them," asserted Jones. "He is the thrall of one or the other of the trusts, and buys only trust pictures."

"I see," said Uncle John, catching the idea; "it's a scheme to destroy competition."

"Exactly," replied young Jones.

"What does the Continental do, Maud?" asked Patsy.

"I don't know," answered the girl; "but perhaps Aunt Jane can tell you."

"I believe the Continental is a sort of trust within itself," explained Mrs. Montrose. "Since we have been connected with the company I have learned more or less of its methods. It employs a dozen or so producing

companies and makes three or four pictures every week. The concern has its own Exchange, or middleman, who rents only Continental films to the theatres that patronize him."

"Well, we might do the same thing," proposed Patsy, who was loath to abandon her plan.

"You might, if you have the capital," assented Mrs. Montrose. "The Continental is an immense corporation, and I am told it has more than a million dollars invested."

"Two millions," said A. Jones.

The girls were silent a while, seriously considering this startling assertion. They had, between them, considerable money, but they realized they could not enter a field that required such an enormous investment as film making.

"I suppose," said Beth regretfully, "we shall have to give up making films."

"Then where are we to get the proper pictures for our theatre?" demanded Patsy.

"It is quite evident we can't get them," said Louise. "Therefore we may be obliged to abandon the theatre proposition."

Another silence, still more grave. Uncle John was discreet enough to say nothing. The Stantons and Mrs. Montrose felt it was not their affair. Arthur Weldon was slyly enjoying the chagrin visible upon the faces of Mr. Merrick's three pretty nieces.

As for A. Jones, he was industriously figuring upon the back of an envelope with a stubby bit of pencil.