CHAPTER XIII

A FOOLISH BOY

It was the youthful Sangoan who first broke the silence. Glancing at the figures he had made he said:

"It is estimated that if twenty picture theatres use any one film--copies of it, of course--that film will pay for its cost of making. Therefore, if you build twenty children's theatres, instead of the one or two you originally proposed, you would be able to manufacture your own films and they would be no expense to you."

They gazed at him in bewilderment.

"That is all simple enough!" laughed Arthur. "Twenty picture theatres at twenty thousand dollars each--a low estimate, my dears, for such as you require--would mean an investment of four hundred thousand dollars. A film factory, with several producing companies to keep it busy, and all the necessary paraphernalia of costumes and properties, would mean a million or so more. Say a million and a half, all told. Why, it's a mere bagatelle!"

"Arthur!" Severely, from Louise.

"I advise you girls to economize in other ways and devote your resources to this business, which might pay you--and might not," he continued, oblivious to stony glares.

"Really, Mr. Jones," said Beth, pouting, "we were not joking, but in real earnest."

"Have I questioned it, Miss De Graf?"

"Mr. Jones was merely trying to show you how--er--er--how impractical your idea was," explained Uncle John mildly.

"No; I am in earnest, too," said the boy. "To prove it, I will agree to establish a plant and make the pictures, if the young ladies will build the twenty theatres to show them in."

Here was another suggestion of a bewildering nature. Extravagant as the offer seemed, the boy was very serious. He blushed a little as he observed Mr. Merrick eyeing him earnestly, and continued in an embarrassed, halting way: "I--I assure you, sir, that I am able to fulfill my part of the agreement. Also I would like to do it. It would serve to interest me and keep me occupied in ways that are not wholly selfish. My--my other business does not demand my personal attention, you see."

To hear this weak, sickly youth speak of investing a million dollars in

a doubtful enterprise, in spite of the fact that he lived on a far-away island and was a practical stranger in America, set them all to speculating anew in regard to his history and condition in life. Seeing that the boy had himself made an opening for a logical query, Uncle John asked:

"Do you mind telling us what this other business is, to which you refer?"

A. Jones moved uneasily in his chair. Then he glanced quickly around the circle and found every eye regarding him with eager curiosity. He blushed again, a deep red this time, but an instant later straightened up and spoke in a tone of sudden resolve.

"Most people dislike to speak of themselves," he said, "and I am no exception. But you, who have kindly received me as a friend, after having generously saved me from an untimely death, have surely the right to know something about me--if, indeed, the subject interests you."

"It is but natural that we should feel an interest in you, Mr. Jones," replied Mr. Merrick; "yet I assure you we have no desire to pry into your personal affairs. You have already volunteered a general statement of your antecedents and the object of your visit to America, and that, I assure you, will suffice us. Pardon me for asking an impertinent question."

The boy seemed perplexed, now.

"I did not consider it impertinent, sir. I made a business proposal to your nieces," he said, "and before they could accept such a proposal they would be entitled to know something of my financial standing."

For a green, inexperienced youth, he spoke with rare acumen, thought Mr. Merrick; but the old gentleman had now determined to shield the boy from a forced declaration of his finances, so he said:

"My nieces can hardly afford to accept your proposition. They are really able to build one or two theatres without inconveniencing themselves, but twenty would be beyond their means. You, of course, understand they were not seeking an investment, but trying, with all their hearts, to benefit the children. I thoroughly approve their original idea, but if it requires twenty picture theatres to render it practical, they will abandon the notion at once."

Jones nodded absently, his eyes half closed in thought. After a brief pause he replied:

"I hate to see this idea abandoned at the very moment of its birth. It's a good idea, and in no way impractical, in my opinion. So permit me to make another proposition. I will build the twenty theatres myself, and furnish the films for them, provided the young ladies will agree to assume the entire management of them when they are completed."

Dead silence followed this speech. The girls did some rapid-fire mental calculations and realized that this young man was proposing to invest something like fourteen hundred thousand dollars, in order that they might carry out their philanthropic conception. Why should he do this, even if he could afford it?

Both Mr. Merrick and Arthur Weldon were staring stolidly at the floor. Their attitudes expressed, for the first time, doubt--if not positive unbelief. As men of considerable financial experience, they regarded the young islander's proposition as an impossible one.

Jones noted this blank reception of his offer and glanced appealingly at Patsy. It was an uncomfortable moment for the girl and to avoid meeting his eyes she looked away, across the lobby. A few paces distant stood a man who leaned against a table and held a newspaper before his face. Patsy knew, however, that he was not reading. A pair of dark, glistening eyes peered over the top of the paper and were steadfastly fixed upon the unconscious features of young Jones.

Something in the attitude of the stranger, whom she had never seen before, something in the rigid pose, the intent gaze--indicating both alertness and repression--riveted the girl's attention at once and gave her a distinct shock of uneasiness.

"I wish," said the boy, in his quiet, firm way, yet with much deference in his manner and tone, "that you young ladies would consider my offer

seriously, and take proper time to reach a decision. I am absolutely in earnest. I want to join you in your attempt to give pleasure to children, and I am willing and--and able--to furnish the funds required. Without your cooperation, however, I could do nothing, and my health is such that I wish to leave the management of the theatres entirely in your hands, as well as all the details of their construction."

"We will consider it, of course, Mr. Jones," answered Beth gravely. "We are a little startled just now, as you see; but when we grow accustomed to the immensity of the scheme--our baby, which you have transformed into a giant--we shall be able to consider it calmly and critically, and decide if we are competent to undertake the management of so many theatres."

"Thank you. Then, I think, I will excuse myself for this evening and return to my room. I'm improving famously, under Dr. Doyle's instructions, but am not yet a rugged example of health."

Patsy took his hand at parting, as did the others, but her attention was divided between Ajo and the strange man who had never for a moment ceased watching him. Not once did the dark eyes waver, but followed each motion of the boy as he sauntered to the desk, got his key from the clerk, and then proceeded to his room, turning up one of the corridors on the main floor.

The stranger now laid his newspaper on the table and disclosed his

entire face for the first time. A middle-aged man, he seemed to be, with iron-gray hair and a smoothly shaven, rather handsome face. From his dress he appeared to be a prosperous business man and it was evident that he was a guest of the hotel, for he wandered through the lobby--in which many other guests were grouped, some chatting and others playing "bridge"--and presently disappeared down the corridor traversed by young Jones.

Patsy drew a deep breath, but said nothing to the others, who, when relieved of the boy's presence, began to discuss volubly his singular proposal.

"The fellow is crazy," commented Arthur. "Twenty picture theatres, with a film factory to supply them, is a big order even for a multi-millionaire--and I can't imagine this boy coming under that head."

"He seemed in earnest," said Maud, musingly. "What do you think, Aunt Jane?"

"I am greatly perplexed," admitted Mrs. Montrose. "Had I not known of the conquest of Goldstein by this boy, who issued orders which the manager of the Continental meekly obeyed, I would have laughed at his proposition. As it is, I'm afraid to state that he won't carry out his plan to the letter of the agreement."

"Would it not be a rash investment, ma'am?" inquired Uncle John.

"Frankly, I do not know. While all the film makers evade any attempt to discover how prosperous--financially--they are, we know that without exception they have grown very wealthy. I am wondering if this young Jones is not one of the owners of the Continental--a large stockholder, perhaps. If so, that not only accounts for his influence with Goldstein, but it proves him able to finance this remarkable enterprise. He doubtless knows what he is undertaking, for his figures, while not accurate, were logical."

"Of course!" cried Patsy. "That explains everything."

"Still," said Uncle John cautiously, "this is merely surmise on our part, and before accepting it we must reconcile it with the incongruities in the case. It is possible that the elder Jones owned an interest in the Continental and bequeathed it to his son. But is it probable? Remember, he was an islander, and a recluse."

"More likely," said Beth, "Ajo's father left him a great fortune, which the boy invested in the Continental stock."

"I have been told," remarked Aunt Jane thoughtfully, "that Continental stock cannot be bought at any price. It pays such enormous dividends that no owner will dispose of it."

"The whole thing is perplexing in the extreme," declared Arthur. "The boy

tells a story that at first seems frank and straightforward, yet his statements do not dovetail, so to speak."

"I think he is holding something back," said Beth; "something that would explain all the discrepancies in his story. You were wrong, Uncle John, not to let him speak when he offered to tell you all."

"There was something in his manner that made me revolt from forcing his confidence," was the reply.

"There was something in his manner that made me think he was about to concoct a story that would satisfy our curiosity," said Louise with a shrug.

Uncle John looked around the circle of faces.

"You are not questioning the young fellow's sincerity, I hope?" said he.

"I don't, for a single second!" asserted Patsy, stoutly. "He may have a queer history, and he may not have told us all of it, but Ajo is honest. I'll vouch for him!"

"So will I, my dear," said Uncle John.

"That is more than I can do, just at present," Arthur frankly stated. "My opinion is that his preposterous offer is mere bluff. If you accepted

it, you would find him unable to do his part."

"Then what is his object?" asked Maud.

"I can't figure it out, as yet. He might pose as a millionaire and a generous friend and philanthropist for some time, before the truth was discovered, and during that time he could carry out any secret plans he had in mind. The boy is more shrewd than he appears to be. We, by chance saved his life, and at once he attached himself to us like a barnacle, and we can't shake him off."

"We don't want to," said Patsy.

"My explanation is that he has fallen in love with one of us girls," suggested Flo, with a mischievous glance at her sister. "I wonder if it's me?"

"It is more likely," said Louise, "that he has discovered Uncle John to be a very--prosperous--man."

"Nonsense, my dear!" exclaimed that gentleman, evidently irritated by the insinuation. "Don't pick the boy to pieces. Give him a chance. So far he has asked nothing from us, but offers everything. He's a grateful fellow and is anxious to help you girls carry out your ambitious plans. That is how I read him, and I think it is absurd to prejudge him in the way you are doing."

The party broke up, the Stantons and Weldons going to their rooms. Beth also rose.

"Are you coming to bed, Patsy?" she inquired.

"Not just now," her cousin replied. "Between us, we've rubbed Uncle John's fur the wrong way and he won't get composed until he has smoked his good-night cigar. I'll sit with him in this corner and keep him company."

So the little man and his favorite niece were left together, and he did not seem in the least ruffled as he lit his cigar and settled down in a big chair, with Patsy beside him, to enjoy it.