

CHAPTER XV

A FEW PEARLS

The next morning Patsy, Beth and Louise met in earnest conference over the important proposition made them by young Jones, and although Uncle John and Arthur Weldon were both present the men took no part in the discussion.

"Some doubt has been expressed," said Beth judicially, "that Ajo is really able to finance this big venture. But he says he is, and that he will carry it through to the end, so I propose we let him do it."

"Why not?" asked Louise. "If he succeeds, it will be glorious. If he fails, we will suffer in no way except through disappointment."

"Well, shall we accept this offer, girls?"

"First," said Louise, "let us consider what we will have to do, on our part, when the twenty theatres are built and the film factory is in operation."

"We are to be the general managers," returned Patsy. "We must select the subjects, or plots, for the pictures, and order them made under our direction. Then we must see that all of our theatres present them in a

proper manner, and we must invite children to come and see the shows. I guess that's all."

"That will be enough to keep us busy, I'm sure," said Beth. "But we will gladly undertake it, and I am sure we shall prove good managers, as soon as we get acquainted with the details of the business."

"It will give us the sort of employment we like," Patsy assured them. "Our first duty will be to plan these theatres for children, and make them as cosy and comfortable as possible, regardless of expense. Ajo will pay the bills, and when all the buildings are ready we will set to work in earnest."

So, when A. Jones appeared he was told that the girls would gladly accept his proposition. The young man seemed greatly pleased by this verdict. He appeared to be much better and stronger to-day and he entered eagerly into a discussion of the plans in detail. Together they made a list of a string of twenty theatres, to be built in towns reaching from Santa Barbara on the north to San Diego in the south. The film factory was to be located in the San Fernando Valley, just north of Hollywood.

This consumed the entire forenoon, and after lunch they met a prominent real estate man whom Jones had summoned to the hotel. This gentleman was given a copy of the list of locations and instructed to purchase in each town the best site that could be secured for a motion picture theatre. This big order made the real estate man open his eyes in surprise.

"Do you wish me to secure options, or to purchase the land outright?" he asked.

"Be sure of your locations and then close the deals at once," replied Jones. "We do not wish to waste time in useless dickering, and a location in the heart of each town, perhaps on the main street, is more important than the price. You will, of course, protect me from robbery to the best of your ability; but buy, even if the price is exorbitant. I will this afternoon place a hundred thousand dollars to your credit in the bank, with which to make advance payments, and when you notify me how much more is required I will forward my checks at once."

"That is satisfactory, sir. I will do the best I can to guard your interests," said the man.

When he had gone the girls accompanied Ajo in a motorcar to Los Angeles, to consult an architect. They visited several offices before the boy, who seemed to estimate men at a glance, found one that satisfied him. The girls explained with care to the architect their idea of a luxurious picture theatre for children, and when he had grasped their conception, which he did with enthusiasm, he suggested several improvements on their immature plans and promised to have complete drawings ready to submit to them in a few days.

From the architect's office they drove to the German-American Bank, where

Ajo gave his check for a hundred thousand dollars, to be placed to the credit of Mr. Wilcox, the real estate agent. The deference shown him by the cashier seemed to indicate that this big check was not the extent of A. Jones' credit there, by any means.

As they drove back to Hollywood, Patsy could not help eyeing this youthful capitalist with wonder. During this day of exciting business deals the boy had behaved admirably, and there was no longer a shadow of doubt in the minds of any of Uncle John's nieces that he was both able and anxious to carry out his part of the agreement.

Patsy almost giggled outright as she thought of Le Drieux and his ridiculous suspicions. One would have to steal a good many pearls in order to acquire a fortune to match that of the Sangoan.

He was speaking of Sangoa now, in answer to a question of Beth's.

"Yes, indeed," said he, "Sangoa is very beautiful, and the climate is even more mild than that of your Southern California. The north coast is a high bluff, on which is a splendid forest of rosewood and mahogany. My father would never allow any of these magnificent trees to be cut, except a few that were used in building our house."

"But how do your people live? What is the principal industry of your islanders?" asked Beth.

"My people are--fishermen," he said, and then the automobile drew up before the hotel entrance and the conversation ended.

It was on the following afternoon, as they all met in the hotel lobby after lunch, that a messenger handed young Jones a neat parcel, for which a receipt was demanded. Ajo held the parcel in his hand a while, listening to the chatter of the girls, who were earnestly discussing plans for the new picture enterprise. Then very quietly and unobtrusively he unwrapped the package and laid upon the table beside him several small boxes bearing the name of a prominent jeweler.

"I hope," said he, taking advantage of a pause caused by the girls observing this action, and growing visibly confused by their involuntary stares of curiosity; "I--I hope that you, my new friends, will pardon a liberty I have taken. I wanted to--to present those who were instrumental in saving my life with--with a--a slight token of my gratitude--a sort of--of--memento of a brave and generous act that gave me back the life I had carelessly jeopardized. No," as he saw surprise and protest written on their faces, "don't refuse me this pleasure, I implore you! The little--eh--eh--mementos are from my own Island of Sangoa, with the necessary mountings by a Los Angeles jeweler, and--please accept them!"

As he spoke he handed to each of the girls a box, afterward giving one to Uncle John and another to Arthur. There remained upon the table three others. He penciled a name upon the bottom of each and then handed them to Patsy, saying:

"Will you kindly present these, with my compliments, to the Misses Stanton, and to their aunt, when they return this evening? Thank you!"

And then, before they could recover from their astonishment, he turned abruptly and fled to his room.

The girls stared at one another a moment and then began laughing. Arthur seemed crestfallen, while Uncle John handled his small box as gingerly as if he suspected it contained an explosive.

"How ridiculous!" cried Patsy, her blue eyes dancing. "And did you notice how scared poor Ajo was, and how he skipped as fearfully as though he had committed some crime? But I'm sure the poor boy meant well. Let's open our boxes, girls, and see what foolishness Ajo has been up to."

Slipping off the cover of her box, Beth uttered a low cry of amazement and admiration. Then she held up a dainty lavalliere, with a pendant containing a superb pearl. Louise had the mate to this, but the one Patsy found had a pearl of immense size, its color being an exquisite shade of pink, such as is rarely seen. Arthur displayed a ring set with a splendid white pearl, while Uncle John's box contained a stick pin set with a huge black pearl of remarkable luster. Indeed, they saw at a glance that the size and beauty of all these pearls were very uncommon, and while the others expressed their enthusiastic delight, the faces of Mr. Merrick and Patsy Doyle were solemn and perplexed. They stared at the pearls with

feelings of dismay, rather than joy, and chancing to meet one another's eyes they quickly dropped their gaze to avoid exchanging the ugly suspicion that had forced itself upon their minds.

With a sudden thought Patsy raised her head to cast a searching glance around the lobby, for although their party was seated in an alcove they were visible to all in the big room of which it formed a part. Yes, Mr. Isidore Le Drieux was standing near them, as she had feared, and the slight sneer upon his lips proved that he had observed the transfer of the pearls.

So the girl promptly clasped her lavalliere around her neck and openly displayed it, as a proud defiance, if not a direct challenge, to that detestable sneer.

Arthur, admiring his ring in spite of his chagrin at receiving such a gift from a comparative stranger, placed the token on his finger.

"It is a beauty, indeed," said he, "but I don't think we ought to accept such valuable gifts from this boy."

"I do not see why," returned his wife Louise. "I think these pretty tributes for saving Mr. Jones' life are very appropriate. Of course neither Beth nor I had anything to do with that affair, but we are included in the distribution because it would be more embarrassing to leave us out of it."

"And the pearls came from Sangoa," added Beth, "so all these precious gifts have cost Ajo nothing, except for their settings."

"If Sangoa can furnish many such pearls as these," remarked Arthur, reflectively, "the island ought to be famous, instead of unknown. Their size and beauty render the gems priceless."

"Well," said Patsy soberly, "we know now where A. Jones got his money, which is so plentiful that he can build any number of film factories and picture theatres. Sangoa must have wonderful pearl fisheries--don't you remember, girls, that he told us his people were fishermen?--for each of these specimens is worth a small fortune. Mine, especially, is the largest and finest pearl I have ever seen."

"I beg your pardon!" sternly exclaimed Uncle John, as he whirled swiftly around. "Can I do anything for you, sir?"

For Mr. Le Drieux had stealthily advanced to the alcove and was glaring at the display of pearls and making notes in a small book.

He bowed, without apparent resentment, as he answered Mr. Merrick: "Thank you, sir; you have already served me admirably. Pardon my intrusion."

Then he closed the book, slipped it into his pocket and with another low bow walked away.

"What rank impertinence!" cried Arthur, staring after him. "Some newspaper reporter, I suppose. Do you know him, Uncle John?"

"He forced an introduction, a few evenings ago. It is a pearl merchant from New York, named Le Drieux, so I suppose his curiosity is but natural."

"Shall we keep our pearls, Uncle?" asked Beth.

"I shall keep mine," replied the little man, who never wore any ornament of jewelry. "It was generous and thoughtful in young Jones to present these things and we ought not offend him by refusing his 'mementos,' as he calls them."

Perhaps all the nieces were relieved to hear this verdict, for already they loved their beautiful gifts. That evening the Stanton girls and their Aunt Jane received their parcels, being fully as much surprised as the others had been, and their boxes also contained pearls. Flo and Maud had lavallieres, the latter receiving one as large and beautiful as that of Patsy Doyle, while Mrs. Montrose found a brooch set with numerous smaller pearls.

Patsy urged them all to wear the ornaments to dinner that evening, which they did, and although Jones was not there to observe the effect of the splendid pearls, Mr. Le Drieux was at his place in the dining room and

made more notes in his little book.

That was exactly what Patsy wanted. "I can't stand the suspense of this thing," she whispered to Uncle John, "and if that man wants any information about these pearls I propose we give it to him. In that way he will soon discover he is wrong in suspecting the identity of Jack Andrews and A. Jones."

Mr. Merrick nodded absently and went to his corner for a smoke. Arthur soon after joined him, while Aunt Jane took her bevy of girls to another part of the loge.

"Le Drieux will be here presently," said Uncle John to young Weldon.

"Oh, the fellow with the book. Why, sir?"

"He's a detective, I think. Anyhow, he is shadowing Jones, whom he suspects is a thief."

He then told Arthur frankly of his former conversation with Le Drieux, and of the puzzling photograph.

"It really resembles the boy," he admitted, with a frown of perplexity, "yet at the same time I realized the whole thing was absurd. Neither Patsy nor I can believe that Jones is the man who robbed an Austrian countess. It's preposterous! And let me say right now, Arthur, that I'm

going to stand by this young fellow, with all my influence, in case those hounds try to make him trouble."

Arthur did not reply at once. He puffed his cigar silently while he revolved the startling accusation in his mind.

"Both you and Patsy are staunch friends," he observed, after a while, "and I have noticed that your intuition as regards character is seldom at fault. But I advise you, in this instance, not to be hasty, for--"

"I know; you are going to refer to those pearls."

"Naturally. If I don't, Le Drieux will, as you have yourself prophesied. Pearls--especially such pearls as these--are rare and easy to recognize. The world does not contain many black-pearls, for instance, such as that you are wearing. An expert--a man with a photograph that strongly resembles young Jones--is tracing some stolen pearls of great value--a collection, I think you said. We find Jones, a man seemingly unknown here, giving away a number of wonderful pearls that are worthy a place in any collection. Admit it is curious, Uncle John. It may be all a coincidence, of course; but how do you account for it, sir?"

"Jones has an island in the South Seas, a locality where most of the world's famous pearls have been found."

"Sangoa?"

"Yes."

"It is not on any map. This man, Le Drieux, positively stated that there is no such island, did he not?"

Uncle John rubbed his chin, a gesture that showed he was disturbed.

"He was not positive. He said he thought there was no such island."

"Well, sir?"

"If Jones could lie about his island, he would be capable of the theft of those pearls," admitted Mr. Merrick reluctantly.

"That is conclusive, sir."

"But he isn't capable of the theft. Le Drieux states that Jack Andrews is a society swell, an all-around confidence man, and a gambler. Jones is a diffident and retiring, but a very manly young fellow, who loves quiet and seems to have no bad habits. You can't connect the two in any possible way."

Again Arthur took time to consider.

"I have no desire to suspect Jones unjustly," he said. "In fact, I have

been inclined to like the fellow. And yet--his quaint stories and his foolish expenditures have made me suspicious from the first. You have scarcely done justice to his character in your description, sir. To us he appears diffident, retiring, and rather weak, in a way, while in his intercourse with Goldstein he shows a mailed fist. He can be hard as nails, on occasion, as we know, and at times he displays a surprising knowledge of the world and its ways--for one who has been brought up on an out-of-the-way island. What do we know about him, anyway? He tells a tale no one can disprove, for the South Seas are full of small islands, some of which are probably unrecorded on the charts. All this might possibly be explained by remembering that a man like Jack Andrews is undoubtedly a clever actor."

"Exactly!" said a jubilant voice behind them, and Mr. Isidore Le Drieux stepped forward and calmly drew up a chair, in which he seated himself. "You will pardon me, gentlemen, for eavesdropping, but I was curious to know what you thought of this remarkable young man who calls himself 'A. Jones.'"

Arthur faced the intruder with a frown. He objected to being startled in this manner. "You are a detective?" he asked.

"Oh, scarcely that, sir," Le Drieux replied in a deprecating way. "My printed card indicates that I am a merchant, but in truth I am a special agent, employed by the largest pearl and gem dealers in the world, a firm with branches in every large European and American city. My name is Le

Drieux, sir, at your service," and with a flourish he presented his card.

The young rancher preferred to study the man's face.

"I am a sort of messenger," he continued, placidly. "When valuable consignments of jewels are to be delivered, I am the carrier instead of the express companies. The method is safer. In twenty-six years of this work I have never lost a single jewel."

"One firm employs you exclusively, then?"

"One firm. But it has many branches."

"It is a trust?"

"Oh, no; we have many competitors; but none very important. Our closest rival, for instance, has headquarters on this very coast--in San Francisco--but spreads, as we do, over the civilized world. Yet Jephson's--that's the firm--do not claim to equal our business. They deal mostly in pearls."

"Pearls, eh?" said Arthur, musingly. "Then it was your firm that lost the valuable collection of pearls you mentioned to Mr. Merrick?"

"No. They were the property of Countess Ahmberg, of Vienna. But we had sold many of the finest specimens to the countess and have records of

their weight, size, shape and color. The one you are now wearing, sir," pointing to Uncle John's scarf pin, "is one of the best black pearls ever discovered. It was found at Tremloe in 1883 and was originally purchased by our firm. In 1887 I took it to Tiffany, who sold it to Prince Godesky, of Warsaw. I carried it to him, with other valuable purchases, and after his death it was again resold to our firm. It was in October, 1904, that I again became the bearer of the pearl, delivering it safely to Countess Ahmberg at her villa. It was stolen from her, together with 188 other rare pearls, valued at a half million dollars, a little over a year ago."

"This pearl, sir," said Uncle John stiffly, "is not the one you refer to. It was found on the shores of the island of Sangoa, and you have never seen it before."

Le Drieux smiled sweetly as he brushed the ashes from his cigar.

"I am seldom mistaken in a pearl, especially one that I have handled," said he. "Moreover, a good pearl becomes historic, and it is my business to know the history of each and every one in existence."

"Even those owned by Jephson's?" asked Arthur.

"Yes; unless they were acquired lately. I have spoken in this manner in order that you may understand the statements I am about to make, and I beg you to listen carefully: Three daring pearl robberies have taken place within the past two years. The first was a collection scarcely

inferior to that of the Countess Ahmberg. A bank messenger was carrying it through the streets of London one evening, to be delivered to Lady Grandison, when he was stabbed to the heart and the gems stolen. Singularly enough, Jack Andrews was passing by and found the dying messenger. He called for the police, but when they arrived the messenger had expired. The fate of the pearls has always remained a mystery, although a large reward has been offered for their recovery."

"Oh; a reward."

"Naturally, sir. Four months later Princess Lemoine lost her wonderful pearl necklace while sitting in a box at the Grand Opera in Paris. This was one of the cleverest thefts that ever baffled the police, for the necklace was never recovered. We know, however, that Jack Andrews occupied the box next to that of the princess. A coincidence--perhaps. We now come to the robbery of the Countess Ahmberg, the third on the list. Jack Andrews was a guest at her house, as I have explained to you. No blame has ever attached to this youthful adventurer, yet my firm, always interested in the pearls they have sold, advised me to keep an eye on him when he returned to America. I did so.

"Now, Mr. Merrick, I will add to the tale I told you the other night. Andrews behaved very well for a few weeks after he landed at New York; then he disposed of seven fine pearls and--disappeared. They were not notable pearls, especially, but two of them I was able to trace to the necklace of Princess Lemoine. I cabled my firm. They called attention to

the various rewards offered and urged me to follow Andrews. That was impossible; he had left no clue. But chance favored me. Coming here to Los Angeles on business, I suddenly ran across my quarry: Jack Andrews. He has changed a bit. The mustache is gone, he is in poor health, and I am told he was nearly drowned in the ocean the other day. So at first I was not sure of my man. I registered at this hotel and watched him carefully. Sometimes I became positive he was Andrews; at other times I doubted. But when he began distributing pearls to you, his new friends, all doubt vanished. There, gentlemen, is my story in a nutshell. What do you think of it?"

Both Mr. Merrick and young Weldon had listened with rapt interest, but their interpretation of the tale, which amounted to a positive accusation of A. Jones, showed the difference in the two men's natures.

"I think you are on the wrong trail, sir," answered Mr. Merrick.

"Doubtless you have been misled by a casual resemblance, coupled with the fact that Andrews is suspected of stealing pearls and Jones is known to possess pearls--the pearls being of rare worth in both cases. Still, you are wrong. For instance, if you have the weight and measurement of the Tremloe black pearl, you will find they do not fit the pearl I am now wearing."

Le Drieux smiled genially.

"It is unnecessary to make the test, sir," he replied. "The pearl Andrews

gave to Miss Doyle is as unmistakable as your own. But I am curious to hear your opinion, Mr. Weldon."

"I have been suspicious of young Jones from the first," said Arthur; "but I have been studying this boy's character, and he is positively incapable of the crimes you accuse him of, such as robbery and murder. In other words, whatever Jones may be, he is not Andrews; or, if by chance he proves to be Andrews, then Andrews is innocent of crime. All your theories are based upon a desire to secure rewards, backed by a chain of circumstantial evidence."

"A chain," said Le Drieux, grimly, "that will hold Jack Andrews fast in its coils, clever though he is."

"Circumstantial evidence," retorted Mr. Merrick, "doesn't amount to shucks! It is constantly getting good people into trouble and allowing rascals to escape. Nothing but direct evidence will ever convince me that a man is guilty."

Le Drieux shrugged his shoulders.

"The pearls are evidence enough," said he.

"To be sure. Evidence enough to free the poor boy of suspicion. You may be a better messenger than you are a detective, Mr. Le Drieux, but that doesn't convince me you are a judge of pearls."

The agent rose with a frown of annoyance.

"I am going to have Jack Andrews arrested in the morning," he remarked.

"If you warn him, in the meantime, I shall charge you with complicity."

Uncle John nearly choked with anger, but he maintained his dignity.

"I have no knowledge of your Jack Andrews," he replied, and turned his back.