

On the Screen

A SERIAL STORY

BY OLIVER SANDYS

Continued from Last Week

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters

Daphne Greening, an Australian girl, married to an Englishman, leaves her husband because of a quarrel caused by his foolish jealousy. She resolves to become an actress and, under the name of Daphne Barry, seeks a position on the London stage. The first successful actress she succeeds in interviewing advises her to keep off the stage, and tells her of the difficulties and temptations of stage life. For two discouraging weeks Daphne continues her search for a position on the stage and fails to notice in the "agony" columns of the newspapers her husband's persistent request that she return home. At last she secures an engagement to rehearse a dangerous horse for a motion picture company, the leading lady, whom she very closely resembles, being unable to manage the animal. A born horsewoman, Daphne immediately conquers the horse. She is complimented by the manager, who offers her a permanent position, tho she can only take small parts on account of her lack of ability as an actress.

But she strove to ignore the possibility of that danger and dear delight even from herself. It was not to be dwelt on. And yet, in the night when she lay alone in the darkness, thinking, thinking, unable to sleep, she found herself hugging the precious thought to herself as one might a little child.

In the daytime she found she had little leisure for repining, and was glad of it. Besides rehearsing Cabbage Tree, she had to personate small parts in many other picture plays in Hughes' repertory. Many of her afternoons were spent with the Egertons.

She was always trying to inspire Lilly with confidence in prospect of the time when she would have to ride Cabbage Tree again. And Lilly would say "yes" and promise to remember with her big eyes, wide with fear, fixed on Daphne's face, while Daphne explained what a tractable animal Cabbage Tree really was.

A week later Lilly was well enough to attend rehearsals, and Daphne abandoned the part to her. She was sorry to have to do so. She enjoyed the riding, especially now that she and her mount were on such excellent terms.

It was obvious to every one that Lilly Fuller could not conquer her fear of the horse. In the earlier scenes, where her riding was a secondary matter, it was a pleasure to watch her rehearse. She was a clever little actress, and her face was a playground for every emotion she cared to express. But the moment Cabbage Tree was associated with her part her dramatic ability completely deserted her. Then she could depict but one emotion—terror.

The reason lay entirely with herself. Altho she did not know it, and could not help it, her nervousness affected the horse. The lack of firmness in her seat, and the indecision that showed in her hands, irritated him.

When she should have held him together she rode with a slack rein; when his head ought to have been free, her weight was always on it. The abrupt change from Daphne's sympathetic handling made him more than ever resent a rider he had chafed under from the very beginning.

At the end of that day's rehearsal Lilly, white and shaking, would have fallen out of the saddle but for her husband's help. Daphne was out of sight, rehearsing under one of Hughes' lieutenants. Cabbage Tree looked around now, his lips moving in anticipation of the lump of sugar his late rider had accustomed him to, but which his present one had, with all Daphne's other instructions, completely forgotten. Because of the expected sugar the horse had gone thru an unpleasant hour without undue show of resentment.

Lilly, watching him, could not restrain a shudder.

"Look at him showing his teeth. Take me away, Ege," she cried.

Cabbage Tree had no sugar that day.

Somewhere in his equine consciousness he registered the fact.

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It was the morning of the dress rehearsal. The photographic record of "Cabbage Tree's Last Ride" would be gin in an hour's time.

Across the breakfast table Egerton looked up at his wife.

"I say, Lil, you're not eating anything. You'll never get thru like this."

The actress pushed her plate away and poured out another cup of tea. It was almost black.

"Rotten for your nerves," her husband frowned.

She gulped it down and then got up. It was time to be off.

"Don't worry about me, Ege," she said. "Honest, I don't feel so nervous as I did. I mustn't forget Cabbage Tree's sugar this time." She put two or three lumps in the breast pocket of her riding coat. "Ready?"

Egerton took her hands and held them tight.

"Why don't you cry off, Lil? Miss Barry would take your place. And if old man Hughes cuts up rough, it only means forfeiting your salary—"

"It's not that. I've never broken a contract in my life, and I'm not going to begin now. No, I'll get thru all right. Last night I dreamed three times that I was falling, so it's sure not to come off. Dreams always go by opposites. Kiss me, and let's be going."

"Why do you want to kiss me?"

Strong feeling made Egerton's voice

animated face, and his heart-strings tightened.

As they passed Daphne's lodgings she came out, bound like themselves, for the scene of rehearsal. She wanted to see how things were managed; to be helpful to Lilly if she could.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"First rate, thanks."

"Brought the sugar?"

"In my pocket." Lilly nodded.

"Three lumps if he believes."

She hooked her arm in Daphne's, and the three walked on together.

"Ever seen a Cinema record made?" asked Egerton.

"No, never. I'm quite interested."

Arrived at their destination the Egertons had to leave Daphne. Operations were about to begin, and they had to make-up.

If ever nature and art could appear at war they did so here this morning. To Daphne, looking on at the preparations, the incongruousness of it all struck her in a new light.

Hitherto she had been able to forget the theatrical aspect of her surroundings, or to regard them as a side-issue, relatively insignificant to the rural beauties of their setting. To her the interest of her new occupation lay in its out-of-door life. That, and the saddle exercise had made her elude its artificial side.

The exhilaration of fast movement on springy turf with the wind in her

But what disconcerted her most of all was the astounding aspect of the performers' faces. She knew nothing of the limitations of photography in its relation to color, and she was quite unable to understand why the actors and actresses had made-up with blues and yellows instead of the usual pinks and whites. They reminded her of the painted savages whose pictures she had seen in books of travel.

Thruout the rehearsal, Hughes and the operator of the ever clicking camera dominated the proceedings. They were always between Daphne and the action of the scene, ordering, shouting, gesticulating. The performance itself went on in comparative silence, broken periodically by a stampede of hoofs. With each change of scene a move had to be made to the new spot where it was to be enacted. Every few minutes Daphne was following in the wake of a hurried procession. To her unaccustomed eyes these breaks and the marshaling of Hughes' forces seemed to result in confusion.

As a matter of fact, the rehearsal was going without a hitch, taking very little longer to perform than the actual play would on the screen. In less than half an hour the final scene was in progress.

"Now then, Miss Fuller," shouted Hughes, "keep it going. Make it the real thing, and don't lose your head. Egerton, mind your cue when you let off at Cabbage Tree. Ready? Then make it hum. Up with you; up with you! Off she goes. Gee! She's riding today! Over the gate! Grand!"

There was a move after this. The chase proceeded by "flood and field." All was motion. Then came the moment when the big scene of all—the crux of the play—was reached. High above the onlookers Cabbage Tree and his rider made their appearance on the brink of the cliff.

"Come along!" cried Hughes. "Don't spare the horse. He can do it all right. Slower now. If he can't walk let him slide!"

Egerton, as the bushranger in pursuit crouching far below among the bushes, ready to shoot, saw unutterable fear in his wife's face. He could do nothing to help her. She had begun the precipitous descent.

Daphne, from afar, also saw that Lilly in her nervousness was hanging on to Cabbage Tree's head. She was afraid to shout advice. It might startle the rider and cause her to lose the fragment of self possession still left to her. She felt her own heart beating fast with apprehension.

Hughes, who was no horseman, was unappreciative of the actual danger. Cabbage Tree was fighting for his head. Lilly, straining at the reins, prevented him getting a safe foothold. It was all wonderfully convincing, and the manager waxed enthusiastic.

"Fine! Now hold him, ready to rear. Egerton, fire! Plump out of the saddle. Grand! A splendid fall! Couldn't have done it better. Don't waste time. Up, up on your feet and race off!"

As Cabbage Tree plunged and reared, Lilly had pitched forward with sickening realism, and the horse falling over her had lashed out before he, too, lay still.

The slight figure of the woman did not move.

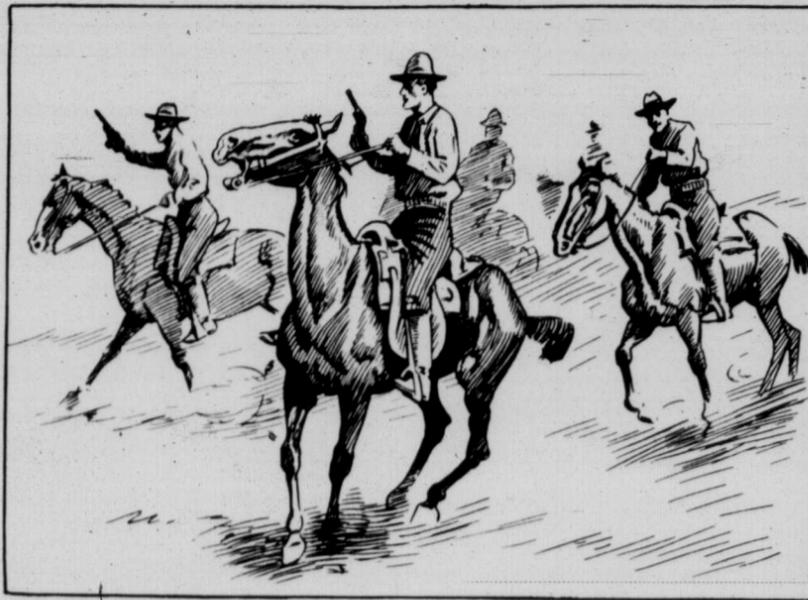
At that moment the machine ceased revolving. Everyone knew then something had happened. Cabbage Tree struggled to his feet. The prone figure, with one foot still in the stirrup, was dragged along violently.

Egerton tore up the cliff, uttering a great cry. Hughes followed him; then Daphne. The players, awe-stricken and livid beneath their make-up, climbed after them. Egerton reached the spot first.

"Lil, Lil!" he called, raising her.

Daphne took one look and had to

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Behind him . . . bushrangers in pursuit. The gang surrounded the barricaded hut.

harsh. He divined her reason well enough.

"Because—oh, for luck!"

And yet they kissed as people do when the prospect of months or perhaps years of parting lie ahead of them. Later, when rehearsal should be over, each was assured that the other would confess what that kiss had signified at the moment.

Lilly blinked the moisture from her eyes. Egerton cleared his throat. A few minutes later they were walking fast toward the heath.

It was a more than usually fine October morning. The sun was struggling thru a luminous haze, giving that refractive brilliance to the atmosphere so desired by photographers.

Later it would be hot. Dew sparkled on the grass. Birds sang. It was all exquisitely sylvan. Nature seemed in one of her beautiful, benignant moods.

Lilly pressed her husband's arm.

"It's good to be alive," she whispered. "Good to be working. Good to be riding—even Cabbage Tree—on a day like this. I feel—oh, I can't exactly explain how I feel, Ege! Full of big thoughts."

He glanced down at her sensitive,

face; the crashing thru the dry bracken under cover of the trees; the natural difficulties of the steep climb up and down the cliff face, had not allowed her healthy colonial mind to dwell much on stage conventions.

But now, no longer a participant in the scene, the full perspective of it came upon her with something like a shock. All its unrealities were laid bare. Its fascination was lost in the mechanical process that dominated it.

Once the action started she had the impression of witnessing a mute rite devised to satisfy the greedy gaze of an uncanny machine. The black appliance on its tripod, with its incessant click-click-click, its protruding eye following every movement with basilisk intentness, affected her unpleasantly.

Other things, clashing with fitness, hurt her sensibilities. To one like herself, versed in the characteristics of bush life, certain inaccuracies of costume, a hogged mane or a docked tail, anachronisms of furniture in the log hut, and the up-country bank premises, the modern type of revolver used by the bushrangers—things that had escaped her when seen separately—now struck her as discordant.