

The Active Life of Dolly of the Dailies: Episode Five, “The Chinese Fan” (1914)

PRODUCTION COMPANY: Edison. DIRECTOR: Walter Edwin. WRITER: Acton Davies. CAST: Mary Fuller (Dolly Desmond), Yale Boss (Daddy, the office boy), Edward Boulden (a reporter), Robert Harvey (Rockwell Crosby, the managing editor), Harry Linson (Mr. Armstrong), Cora Williams (Mrs. Armstrong), Richard Neill (a high officer of the secret society) Bessie Learn (Muriel Armstrong). RUNNING TIME: 16 minutes.

The 1910s saw a new kind of heroine appear on movie screens, one noteworthy less for her extraordinary beauty than for her daring and resourcefulness. This woman would often perform her work in a male-dominated arena, winning the day with confident self-reliance and an imaginative capacity seemingly unavailable to her male peers. The figure appeared especially in the first multi-episode movie series and serials, which sported alliterative titles that always hinted at danger: See, for example, *The Perils of Pauline*, *The Exploits of Elaine*, and *The Hazards of Helen*. *The Active Life of Dolly of the Dailies* and its fifth episode, “The Chinese Fan”—one of only two installments extant, thanks to the recovery and preservation efforts of the New Zealand Film Archive—fits squarely into this popular genre.¹

Produced by the Thomas A. Edison Company, the *Dolly of the Dailies* series starred Mary Fuller in the title role of an ace big-city newspaper reporter. Starting her career at Vitagraph in 1908, Fuller soon moved to Edison and starred in one of the first American series, the monthly *What Happened to Mary* (1912–13), along with its sequel, *Who Will Marry Mary?* (1913–14). She had also appeared in the first filmed adaptation of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in 1910. By the time she starred in *Dolly of the Dailies*, which premiered on January 31, 1914, she was one of the most popular female stars in America, rivaling Mary Pickford.² Director Walter Edwin, who had also worked with Fuller on the *Mary* films, was less of a household

1. The British Film Institute National Archive reports holding the tenth episode, “Dolly Plays Detective.”

2. Jennifer M. Bean, *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*, ed. Richard Abel (New York: Routledge, 2005), 262.

name, but he would go on to direct the 1915 drama *The Spendthrift*, starring Irene Fenwick, the one-time wife of Lionel Barrymore. A copy of that film survives in the Library of Congress.

An early example of corporate synergy, serial and series films worked through the cooperation of studios with newspapers or magazines. *What Happened to Mary*, for instance, had appeared in regular monthly installments in the *The Ladies' World*.³ Story episodes would be printed in a newspaper every week or so, usually just prior to the film's premiere. Each of *Dolly's* 12 episodes was released on the last Saturday of every month. Newspapers used the stories to build circulation and promote the film at the same time, keeping audiences in suspense until the serial's conclusion. Serials and series revolutionized American moviegoing by encouraging audiences to visit theaters regularly as a matter of course, thus establishing a habit. They also tapped new fans through the newspapers, as one promoter told *Moving Picture World*, reaching "a class of people who are interested in the pictures and who do not have an opportunity to scan the pages of the many journals devoted to the entertainment in which they are interested."⁴ Soon, most companies were making serial films, and the prevalence of these extended narrative projects could have made audiences more receptive to longer films.

Though packaged as parts of a larger cycle, individual episodes of these early series about women in jeopardy were complete in themselves, conforming to the format developed earlier by the French in comic or adventure series built around a recurring character and actor. The so-called cliff-hanger model of the serial, in which an episode would conclude on a note of unresolved danger that would not be addressed until the beginning of the next installment, was an American invention pioneered by Selig's *The Adventures of Kathlyn* (1914) and Pathé's *The*

3. Robert Carlton Brown, *What Happened to Mary: A Novelization from the Play and the Stories Appearing in The Ladies' World* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1913).

4. Shelley Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture After the Nickelodeon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 105.

Perils of Pauline. However popular, *Dolly of the Dailies* was far from the most successful of women's peril movie series. That honor belongs to *The Hazards of Helen*, starring Helen Holmes, which ran for 119 episodes between November 1914 and February 1917.⁵

Dolly of the Dailies was the pawn in a game of industrial espionage between William Randolph Hearst and Cyrus McCormick, who ran the *Chicago Tribune*. After learning of McCormick's plan to publish serialized story episodes of *The Adventures of Kathlyn*, which helped garner 50,000 new readers for the *Tribune*, Hearst bought the rights to *Dolly of the Dailies* after it had already gone into production, in order to print its story episodes in his own Chicago newspaper, the *Evening American*.⁶ Hearst's investment in the serial film format would yield even larger dividends with the premiere of the wildly popular *Perils of Pauline* a few months after *Dolly*. Interestingly, the "Chinese Fan" episode of *Dolly*, released in late March 1914, echoes the ruthless real-life newspaper competition that accompanied its creation.⁷

Written by romance novelist Acton Davies, the film begins in the offices of the *Comet*, a fictional metropolitan daily newspaper, where an office boy shows off the Chinese fan he found in Chinatown, and the paper's managing editor learns that the daughter of a bank president has been kidnapped. The editor asks two male reporters to go cover a new play showing at the Chinese Theatre, but Dolly Desmond, a reporter, overhears and asks for the assignment. When the office boy hands her the fan along with her ticket for the show, a colleague warns her not to wear it: "You never can tell about the Chinese. It may be dangerous." In the silent era, the image of the sinister "Oriental" rapist was a common trope, making its way into films like Cecil B.

5. Jennifer M. Bean, "Film Notes: *The Hazards of Helen*: Episode 13, 'The Escape on the Fast Freight,'" National Film Preservation Foundation, <http://www.filmpreservation.org/preserved-films/screening-room/the-hazards-of-helen-episode-26-1915>.

6. Robert C. Allen, *To Be Continued: Soap Operas around the World* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 33.

7. "Progressive Silent Film List," Silent Era, <http://www.silentera.com/PSFL/index.html>.

DeMille's *The Cheat* (1915) and D.W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919). "As a pervasively displayed stereotype in popular culture, Asian men were routinely portrayed as gangsters or rapists with perverted sexual appetites for white women."⁸ The villainous Chinese of "The Chinese Fan" conform to this rubric, and Dolly's status as a woman alone contributes to the threat of sexual menace.

Dolly attends the Chinese Theatre, which is populated only by men until she walks in, and soon enough her fan—revealed as the badge of a secret society—causes a stir. A fight over the fan breaks out between rival gangs, causing most of the men to flee the theater. Dolly is taken to an upstairs room and locked in, at which point, in a convenient melodramatic coincidence, she discovers Muriel Armstrong, the kidnapped banker's daughter. They accidentally wake the "opium-crazed" guardian, who begins to wrestle with Dolly and knocks over a candle, starting a large fire (at this point, the film stock is tinted dark red). Although instinct tells her to run, Dolly realizes that if the two women let the fire burn, they'll be able to escape without letting the police know.

Instead of heading to the Armstrong residence, Dolly brings Muriel straight to the *Comet* office, and—in a biting amoral twist—the editors applaud her ingenuity. "Keep Miss Armstrong with you tonight," she is told. "Don't let her family or anyone else know until morning. We'll get a scoop." Dolly is delighted and holds Muriel's hand while the reporters begin taking down her story. The next morning, when Muriel is brought back to her parents, her father tries to write Dolly a check, but Dolly refuses the reward. "I simply did my duty," she says, having saved the day for both the newspaper and the family. "The Chinese Fan" probably wouldn't pass muster as a proto-feminist artifact, but it's worth noting that at no point do Dolly's

8. Jun Xing, *Asian America through the Lens: History, Representations and Identity* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1998), 56.

male colleagues call into question her abilities as a journalist. Granted, she is sent by her editor to review a play, not investigate a kidnapping, but there is no evidence that Dolly is treated any differently from a male employee. A glimpse at the *Moving Picture World*'s plot summary for "The Perfect Truth," the inaugural *Dolly of the Dailies* serial, reveals that Dolly became a newspaper reporter solely on her own merits, after a journalist on her town's local paper heard her deliver an eloquent graduation speech.⁹

In lieu of a cliff-hanger, the episode ends with a mission statement of sorts: "A reporter is bound to come in contact with the seamy side of life. That is why Dolly has interesting adventures. Don't miss her next one." Despite Mary Fuller's wholesome appeal, the sordidness of "The Chinese Fan"—a chronicle of kidnapping, dangerous foreigners, and a fourth estate more devoted to profit than to a family's well-being—would seem to be the film's main selling point. Interestingly, according to coverage in women's magazines such as *Home Chat*, *Dolly of the Dailies* was welcomed as a series that alleviated the gloom of impending war. A story about *Dolly* in *Home Chat* was introduced with the title "Nothing to Do with the War!"¹⁰

Fuller's career would end abruptly in 1917, after several projects yielded disappointing box office returns. After years of obscurity that included hospitalization for a nervous breakdown, a 1926 attempt to restart her career was met with little interest.

—Akiva Gottlieb

9. *Moving Picture World*, "The Perfect Truth," January 31, 1914, 578.

10. Cheryl Buckley and Hilary Fawcett, *Fashioning the Feminine: Representation and Women's Fashion from the Fin de Siècle to the Present* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 62.