CHAPTER I

OLD OLIVER SILVER

"WHO'S that white-headed old geezer?" asked the drummer from the Middle West, letting the ashes from his stogie fall on the beautiful rug of the Hotel Splendide.

"Oh, that's Oliver Silver—the ex-actor," answered the sleek-haired desk clerk, putting his pen behind his ear, and blotting the page where the drummer had just registered with a flourish.

"Lived here long?" the drummer went on. He seemed in no hurry to get to his room.

"A number of years—we have a few steady people, you know—not all transients. He's an old friend of the boss, who used to admire him on the stage. Sort of cronies in England. The boss'd never let Old Silver want for anything. I'm not telling any secrets. Everybody knows his history. He's in 931. Been in it so long that the room needs re-papering. He's furious that he's been put out for a few days. Hates

change of any kind. Walks the corridors. Don't feel at home in the cubbyhole we've given him in the meantime. Gets cranky once in a while." He went on with his writing. The drummer noted the beautiful Spencerian penmanship as his own name went on a card. "Want to meet him? Flatter him a little—you know actors, how they like to be patted on the back."

The drummer smiled the smile which usually he reserved for his best customers. "Some other time," he said, looking down at the bellboy who had come to fetch his grip. "In the old days I could have taken him into the bar and got him going after a few drinks under his belt. But you don't get confidential over soda water," he laughed. "Besides, he looks as if he'd acted only in Shakespeare, and I was never strong on classics. Gimme a good leg show, any time. . . . What's doing down on gay little Broadway?"

He had started to follow the boy, and looked over his shoulder at the clerk.

"Lots of things," said the latter. "Ask Annie, over at the news stand. She knows!" And he gave a wicked little wink, which immediately he tried to withdraw. But who ever succeeded in withdrawing a wink?

"Thanks," called out the drummer, in his nasal voice. "See you later. Got to get a nip first." And *he* winked, meaningly; but he didn't try to withdraw the wink.

Meanwhile, the retired—but by no means retiring—old actor who had been under discussion, paced the garish corridor uneasily, his white head bowed as if in deep thought.

He was a lonely figure, in striking contrast to the folk around him. He had long looked upon this place as one which contained all the drama of a theatre. From his window he could see the lights of the great city as they blossomed forth each night. He watched the pageant of the motors as they swung through the streets, and into the dusk of the Park, like fireflies flittering everywhere. And he wondered where all the people were going. Always going, ever moving. Restless creatures. Pitiful human beings seeking futile pleasures. Incessantly jostling one another, hurrying to those glowing dramas down on Broadway, aching to forget. To forget what?

And then he would turn and descend in the elevator, watching the faces that came into the gilded box. He could see their tired reflections in the mirrors—why, did every one in this monstrous town look so weary? Once in a while

there would be a girl's flower-like face, untouched by the marks of time; but only occasionally. Most of these creatures looked bored, satiated, unsatisfied.

There was a story in every face—a whole volume sometimes. There was an unwritten tale in all those eyes. He used to amuse himself by wondering about these folk, who passed before him like phantoms on a lantern-side. What was the meaning of all?—every one ticketed, bracketed, catalogued, tucked away in little boxes, tier above tier. Each knowing his own destination, and his own designation; each numbered by the clerks below; losing his identity on a tiny blue card, like the drummer, which was only one of hundreds of other cards behind the room clerk's desk.

He himself was one of them. Did they wonder about him? He was not so much Oliver Silver, as Number 931. The thought frightened him. And once . . . once in the old, dead days he had been a person of importance, strutting his little hour upon the boards. Had he not supported Irving, and Booth, and Modjeska? Had he not listened to that loveliest sound an actor ever hears—the ripple of applause that begins like a soft wave reaching out for the shore, then goes thundering in a final crash,

with cries of "Bravo!" rising above the unbelievable din? And had he not bowed and bowed to that half-seen multitude out there, taken his calls again and again with the greatest artists in the world?

And who remembered him now? Nothing so dead as a dead actor—or even one "at liberty." Who, of all those puppets who ambled by him, knew his name to-day? Yet once it had been blazoned in electric lights over many a playhouse—over the playhouse where some of these creatures were going to-night. Strange world. Strange folk within it, who so soon forgot.

But he must not grow cynical, like them. He must, for the sake of his valiant old days, keep a high heart within him. He must retain the sweetness and honey of life. If evil fortunes had brought him to this lonely existence in a mere caravanserai, he must not forget that others, too, had fallen on troublous times. He had known his golden share of fame. He could be grateful for that. After all, he had lived in Arcadia, in that wonderful world behind the footlights—that world of make-believe which sometimes comes to be more real than the round of dull routine which most mortals know. The world could take away much—it could never

rob him of his memories. These were put away in lavender.

"Good evening," he would say to the elevator-man—he knew them all by name—as he stepped into the car when it reached his floor. His voice was golden still. He knew the wonder of it, the power of its cadences, even now. Seventy, was he? Well, he didn't look it. The mirrors in the lift told him that. True, his hair was long and white—but he had kept all of it—yes, every thread; and he would smile, glancing at white expanses on the crowns of far younger men. Time had been good to him. His skin did not sag—even now. The firm, strong chin, the beautifully moulded nose, the keen eyes—they were still there, looking back at him in the glass; and even in the merciless light of the lift (being half English, he always thought of it as the lift) he knew that he could hold his own with any man ten years his junior.

For youth is one of the most precious boons the actor knows. Eternal youth. And a young heart. And enthusiasm. Poor? No, he told himself every day, he was rich—rich in these blessings. And rich in his memories, too.

They were re-papering his room. What a nuisance—what a confounded nuisance! Why did rooms have to be done over? The old

flowery design on the walls was good enough for him. What if it was getting dim and dingy? He loved dimness and dinginess. He even craved the old gas-lit times. Damn these bright upper chandeliers, with their piercing light. Hurt one's eyes. Made one sleepy, instead of keeping one awake. The old, dim footlights—ah! those were as they should be. Now it was this new-fangled upper lighting, invented by these modern managers, like Belasco. The theatre was going to pot, that's what it was.

He was always thinking of the old days, but he knew it wasn't good for him. Was he losing step with his own time? Bad thing, losing step. Maybe that was why he couldn't get an engagement any more. Shingled hair, cigarettes between flappers' lips, boys with balloon-like trousers, hip-flasks—my! what was the world coming to? These up-to-the-minute young people—what did it all mean, and how could an old bird like himself stand a chance? No morals any more, he'd heard. Self-expression was the watchword. Do as you please. Individualism. No more fundamentalism.

He grew bewildered. Worse, when he was alone, he grew not a little terrified. And much as he resented the re-papering of his tiny room, he was rather glad, to-day, to be forced out of

it for a time; for he had to mingle with the crowd down here in the corridor. Yet how alone one could be in a crowd!

He paced back and forth, like a lion. He had read the paper from beginning to end—advertisements and all. Should he take in a movie? No; he couldn't. Didn't like the damn things. Another expression of modernity. He'd gone in them once, himself; but he soon got out, though they told him he photographed well. That profile of his . . . but he missed the audience. What sense was there acting with only a silly little violinist playing behind a piece of scenery, to make him "emote"? Bosh and fiddlesticks! What he longed for was the roar of the gallery, as in the old, tempestuous days. To the devil with the movies.

He heard a voice behind him. "Lonesome?" it said.

He turned. Barrow, it was—the proprietor of the Splendide. Good old Barrow—his best friend.

"Yes, Richard," said Oliver Silver. "They've turned me out of 931, as you know. Why couldn't they leave me alone?"

Barrow laughed. "You're just the same, aren't you, Oliver? You'll never change. But the room did need freshening up a bit. You'll

like it all the better when you get back. I've told them to hurry the job. You know you can use my sitting-room whenever you want to. Why don't you dine with me to-night? I've got some pre-war claret, you know. A hundred cases still in the cellar. Prohibition's never going to bother *us*." And he put his hand affectionately on Silver's shoulder.

"Thanks. I'll come with pleasure." He was always formal, even with Barrow. An Old-World courtesy was part of him.