

CHAPTER X

LITTLE MARY'S FLIGHT

TWO days went by, and no word, no trace of little Mary. Then, on the third morning, when Old Silver had wellnigh worn himself sick over the disappearance of the child, a telegram was brought to him in 931. He feared evil news; but the yellow slip of paper contained these words:

DEAR DEAR FRIEND OF MINE I AM SAFE
AND WELL WILL WRITE SOON THANK
YOU.

MARY

That was a relief. The girl was alive, and well—even if not happy. Time would reveal the whole story.

In the meantime, little Mary's adventures took the most exciting turn imaginable. We must follow her from the police station that fatal night of her apprehension.

Officers of the law began a search for her.

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They were convinced that she knew the mark on the outside of the cigar box which contained the smuggled pearls; but she and the elderly gentleman and the pale young man had absolutely eluded every one. Their whereabouts were unknown.

When Mary was bailed out of jail, she found herself being rapidly driven away, not in the big car which had thundered to the door, as the police suspected, but in a taxi which had been carefully placed around the corner; the driver of the limousine was in the plot and disappeared immediately the old gentleman entered the station-house. It was as if every detail had been rehearsed and directed by a master hand, as in a movie story.

A few words of encouragement were whispered into Mary's ear. She was so nerve-racked, had been under such a terrific strain since her arrest, that she could not think coherently. She did not know who this old man was at her side, but she imagined he was Barrow's lawyer. She did not even know the direction in which they were speeding—nor did she much care. She all but fell asleep in the cab. Suddenly she was roused and heard the old gentleman saying kindly:

“We must get out here and walk a bit,

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my child. Don't be afraid. It is better for you."

She did as she was bid—in fact, there was nothing else she could do. They walked a few blocks on a side street. Then another taxi was hailed, and she was driven awhile in that; and the same process was gone through again. Such extravagance! thought the simple little Mary. One taxi would have been sufficient—quite an expenditure, indeed; for she noticed that they were in the neighbourhood of Ninety-fifth Street, and she saw respectable houses all about her. But this was by no means her destination. A third taxi was summoned, and they drove to the entrance of the Park. Here again they changed. A rush through the warm June night, and soon they were at Central Park West. Here they walked for another block or two, and finally she was led into a most decent-looking mansion. A most decent-looking elderly woman came forward, and Mary, numb with fright now, was taken to a bedroom above—a handsomely furnished chamber—and given some coffee, clean linen, and shown the immense bath-room which was for her use alone. The old gentleman did not follow her. He told the woman to say to Mary that it would be wiser for her to remain

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here that night—oh, she would be perfectly safe!—not to worry at all. The next morning she would be allowed to do as she pleased; but for this one night she must remain in seclusion and make no effort to escape. The poor child was so weary that her brain was in a whirl; all she wanted was sleep, and silence, and dreams, no matter how troubled. Anything to get away from the reality that had been killing her these last few hours.

The old woman was kindness itself. She helped her disrobe, and after a hot bath she tucked her into the big four-poster bed, turned out the lights, and left her. She even kissed her good night. And as Mary dropped into a troubled slumber the first rays of the morning sun came up; but she was too tired to notice it.

She was not awakened until noon the next day. The kind old woman said to her, as she provided her with breakfast on a dainty tray:

“My child, you’re in an awful mess with the police; but don’t be frightened. We had thought of disguising you—dyeing that pretty hair of yours, so as to change your appearance completely; but I don’t think it will be necessary, after all. However, it is not wise for you to remain in this city.”

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“Where am I, and what does all this mean? I’m only out on bail, and if I run away I can be arrested again, and things will be very serious for me. You know that. Oh, can’t I telephone to Mr. Silver and ask him to come to me again?”

“Hush, child. You will be in no serious danger so long as you leave yourself in our hands. I had a child of my own once—a darling young thing; but she died when she was only sixteen. I couldn’t be unkind to anyone like you. Please trust me.”

There was warmth and a real motherliness in her tone. Mary believed her. Mary believed in every one.

A man of about forty called for her in a taxi. She was told to get into it. All would be well if she simply obeyed instructions.

This man told her that he was the valet of the old gentleman of last night’s adventure. At the Pennsylvania Station he took her into a train and sat beside her. He said never a word now, and Mary, glancing at him from time to time, began to think how much he looked—only vastly younger—like the old gentleman of the night before.

The valet never spoke during the journey, but he provided her with papers and magazines

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and gave her luncheon. They seemed to have travelled about five hours, but Mary was never quite certain of the time when she thought it all over afterwards; for she fell asleep twice on the way for all her slumber of the night before.

When she awakened the second time, she found herself sitting all alone, with her ticket, to some little place she had never heard of, stuck in the seat in front of her, as well as that of the valet. She kept waiting for him to return, but he never did. He must have got out somewhere and then missed the train again, the simple girl thought.

A stout, florid-looking man came and sat by her side, as the train was crowded. He asked first, quite politely, if he might do so, and then he fell into genial conversation. Mary was not a little frightened. She had learned something of life in her brief and colourful career; but she was strangely innocent. She thought only of the police, and told herself to be on her guard, as this might be a detective. Why should she be accused, though? What had she done that was wrong? Oh, it was terrible; and here she was, alone, travelling to some unknown place.

The florid fellow grew very communicative,

and soon he allayed her early fears. He told her he was a circus manager, and had been down to New York to try to get hold of a girl to ride in his small rodeo. He had been unsuccessful and was in despair about the show that night. He talked horses a long while—fondly, gently, sympathetically. She began to like him. Anyone who loved horses could have no evil in him passed through her mind. And soon she began to talk back—a very burst of horse-flesh conversation, and the florid man began to sit up and take notice. “Why, you love ’em, too, don’t you, kid?” he said, delighted.

“I ought to. I rode a lot out in Arizona.” And she recounted some of her life there at her father’s ranch.

“Why, I’m running a tour that’ll take us way out West—God’s country,” the florid one exclaimed. “Why couldn’t you come with us and save my little show, eh?”

Days later, when she had a moment to sit down and write to Oliver Silver, she told him of what happened afterwards. She had recorded the events up till this time, and then she proceeded:

“I took the florid man up, dear old friend of my mother’s! I got off the train with him

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—oh, I wasn't a bit afraid. I must tell you what thrilling things befell me. You won't believe them. Nobody would. And I couldn't blame them. But listen :

“That night I found myself in a most motley crowd, under a little tent. Grease-paint again! The old smell of the show business! It got into my nostrils. It intoxicated me. And the horses! They gave me a wonderful bay to ride, and I showed off a bit—I guess I was crazy with delight. And I forgot all my troubles as soon as I made my mount. And I was free—oh, so free! The thrill of it all—I can't believe it yet. I did save the show that evening—I can't help knowing that I did. Maybe you will understand what I mean—you who have saved many a poor show, too, as my mother often told me you did.

“Well, there was a sweet girl there named Nellie Bond, and she and I have become dear friends. We got lodgings in the same house that first night, and she asked me if I'd mind if one of the boys in the show—one of the best riders—came and had a bite of supper with us. I didn't know at first if this would be right. But I'd seen the lad, and I knew he must be all to the good—a lad with his eyes couldn't be a wrong 'un. We became the best

of friends—all three of us, and Billy Burton—that's his name—amazed us by telling us that he'd met an old acquaintance of his in the town that afternoon—an Englishman, like himself. 'He's got a farm near here,' Billy Burton told us, 'and he wants to take us all out to it to-morrow. He'll call for us in his Ford.'

"It sounded like a dream. A farm! And me back riding, and Nellie so pretty, and Burton so lithe and happy. And this unknown friend of his, sounding so romantic! I got all hippity-hoppy inside. Little tickling things came all over my flesh and I forgot everything—except you, dear Oliver Silver! I'll never forget you—never. Please don't worry about me. I'm on the crest of the wave; but I won't give you any address just yet. I'm writing this while I'm pretty sleepy and will finish it some other day. In the meantime, believe in me. And I hope they catch that rascal of a pale young man and put him in the jail if he's done wrong, instead of your little Mary."

Days passed. Oliver couldn't believe what he had read. It was altogether too fantastic for his 'old head. But Mary, who seemed destined to have nothing but adventures in her young life, would send him further word.

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Of that he was sure. And to his joy, he found another letter in his box one morning.

"Oh, it's been too wonderful!" Mary wrote in her childish scrawl, which he had learned to love. "We went out to the farm that next day. It seems that Billy Burton and his English friend had fought in the same regiment in France in the horrid war.

"A good chap, if ever there was one, but up to the very moment of his calling for us Billy Burton had forgotten his name—think of that! But those things happen to men—they're so close in wars, and so far apart when they end!

"Billy Burton began to notice me. He seemed to like me, and I somehow felt that Nellie Bond was taking a fancy to the new English lad who ran the farm. First, I thought she was stuck on Billy; but that was not the case. And you can't imagine that I would ever try to look at a boy that my best girl friend chose for her very own, can you, dear Mr. Silver? So my conscience is clear, even if my record with the police is not! Oh, but life is sweet sometimes, when you're young, and riding, and meeting nice people.

"That day of hunting near the farm! I can't forget it, ever. Both the boys were thrilled

at the way I got over the jumps, and how the dogs made friends with me at once."

Mary couldn't tell Old Silver the most important thing of all, however; and that was that young Billy Burton began to fall in love with her that day in the open. She knew it. She saw it. She felt it. She was a little panicky. She, an ex-toe dancer, an ex-cigarette-girl, and now a fugitive from justice!—oh, what wasn't she that was not to be told? Billy was Somebody—of that she was sure. It was the way he carried himself; the way he talked. He wasn't a rider, born to a silly show like theirs! She sensed something fine and big and strong in him. You see, she, too, was falling in love—only, she didn't know it at once.

They followed the troupe to the next town, and the next; and there would come letters and wires from the boy who owned the nice farm, addressed to Nellie Bond. Were all four of them in love, little Mary wondered. She guessed they were. Her fright was forgotten—yes, completely forgotten. Youth never remembers any trouble long, no matter how serious. And the rodeo was making money; and there were starry nights and moon-drenched meadows where they played in the delicious open country, and always Billy by her side,

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telling her again the dearest story that anyone has ever heard—the old, old story of young love, young desire, young dreams.

So the golden summer wore on. Old Silver could have traced little Mary—but he kept her secret. He never told anyone of those glowing letters of hers. She wrote to him all the time. He finally learned of the blossoming romance; and in the meanwhile the police had traced the pale young man, and he was in custody. He had told everything; he had given little Mary a true bill of innocence. And yet . . . her presence did seem necessary at the proceedings. But Old Silver never told what he knew.