CHAPTER XIII

THE DEAR OLD COUPLE

OLD 931 was literally old 931 for several days. He could not leave his room. While the motor had broken no bones, it had shaken him up more than he guessed; and at his age . . . just what Dollie had thought—you never can tell.

Chrysanthemums brightened up the corner of his snug little box of a room, as those daffodils had done months before. When Barrow came in to see how he was, trying to hide his alarm, Old Silver thanked him for them.

"Oh, they're not from me," the proprietor said. "Guess again."

It was not until later that he learned how the dozen yellow flames came to be sent him. Each was from one of the employees—Pete, Erdleigh, the desk clerk, the floor clerk, the night elevator-man, the doorman, the head waiter, Annie at the cigar counter, and so on down the line. Each had contributed fifty cents to a general

fund, and the big bright bouquet was the happy result.

"Yet they say New York is a hard, agate city!" Old Silver said to himself, with the suspicion of a tear in his eye. "Damnable lie, that's what it is. It's one of the kindest old towns in the whole wicked world!" And he went off into a delightful sleep.

When he awakened, he remembered the rendezvous he had made with Charles, the doorman. Of course he couldn't keep it now. He must send word to him, though of course the news must have spread that Old 931 was laid up; and wasn't Charles one of those who had helped to make the bouquet possible? Yet Silver felt that he must send him some special message. This he did. And then, as ill-luck would have it, Charles caught cold the very next day and was laid up at his lodgings for two or three weeks. He just escaped pneumonia; and when Old Silver heard about his illness he recalled his tragically haggard face that afternoon. "Guess he was on the way to a hard sickness then," he said to himself. "Poor fellow! He hasn't a cosy room like this one of mine, I'll wager." And he sent him some books to read, and tipped the chef, sending over a basket of dainties.

In the meantime, during his quiet convalescence, Old 931 didn't know what he would have done if he hadn't had friends like Jack and Queenie Fordish. He had known them for years in England, where they had played in drifting companies through the provinces. Later they, like himself, had come to the States. They had never been stars—just good, reliable artists who fitted into plays of the old-fashioned type, such as "Sweet Lavender." They had supported the Kendals in their hey-day, and E. W. Willard, and they were proud of these old associations. Actors of the old school—how rare they were in these less tranquil times! They had saved enough to buy a little box of a place down Long Island way, and thither Old Silver often journeyed for a week-end, digging in their garden with them both, playing chequers with Jack after dinner, when they had drunk some of Queenie's home-brew—she was noted for her peach brandy and her real English ale. And Jack's cigars were always the best.

They were a plump little couple. Queenie had been quite a favourite in her time, with a contagious laugh that shook the very walls of the little Long Island home. They had a cat in lieu of children—that was their deepest regret: that there were no little Fordishes running about.

But then they would have been grown-ups by now, and married, and perhaps no longer at home ; so why worry over what never had been ? Enough that the cat purred, and Queenie purred at Jack, and Jack at Queenie, until the whole air was set in such a contented rumble that it was wonderful.

Silver could remember them in London, in some suburban theatre. While Jack was on the stage, Queenie would sit in the wings awaiting his exit and beam upon him ; and he would do the same when it came her turn for a scene. They were always together. It was unthinkable that either should take an engagement unless the other were given a part in the same piece. Queenie would knit at rehearsals—she was always making something—socks, ties, d'oyleys—anything to keep occupied. A glamour was about them, and in the world of the theatre they were quite celebrated. The newspapers printed little or nothing about them, since nowadays only stars seem to be worth the notice of the diligent and ubiquitous press-agent.

But Queenie and Jack didn't care. They were so happy that people used to turn in the streets, in the 'buses—anywhere they chanced to see them, and smile at Darby and Joan of a later day.

Jack was for ever reminiscing—his old days had been wonderful, and each year they seemed to him even more touched with the light of romance. Distance did indeed lend enchantment to his youth in the theatre, though he had not begun life as an actor. And he and Queenie each had one secret which neither had ever divulged, for all their love-making.

Each had been divorced!

But so long ago that the event seemed now like something which had occurred in another incarnation.

Yet the disaster was like a ghost between them—a ghost that might whisper its wretched secret to the other and spoil a dream of living, making it something to be shattered in a twinkling.

And this guilty secret caused each of them to read with avidity all the divorce scandals which filled the newspapers—not from any prurient desire to know the ghastly details of modern life, but to give them a sense of security in their present happiness. They loathed salacious lines in plays, and it was well known that when they read a script and found anything the least naughty in the lines, even though it meant a monetary loss, one of them would feign illness after the first rehearsal and they would both leave the cast.

"We must do our little bit toward making the stage a decent place," they would say shyly. And they would retire to the country until the right vehicle came along. They knew much of sacrifice; but they did not care. Better to be happy with a clear conscience than lend their names to programmes on which they had no wish to appear.

Neither of them, of course, had been the guilty one in those divorces of long ago. Poor Queenie, in her extreme youth—she could have been only eighteen at the time—had been captured by a thorough bad lot—a fellow who drank (though she did not at first know it) and who swiftly spent everything of hers he could lay his foul hands upon. Also, he cruelly beat her, and finally deserted her altogether; and her father made her get a divorce as quickly as possible. Looking back afterwards, she felt that the brief months she spent with this scoundrel constituted no marriage all all.

Jack's experience had been equally tragic and disastrous. At twenty-one, when he thought of taking up the law, he fell for a pretty piece of fluff, as silly a maiden as one would encounter. But perhaps she was not so unworldly as she pretended, for within two months he discovered that she was brazenly consorting with an old

barrister near their home. After he procured his divorce he never heard a word about her. She disappeared, almost as if she had never been.

Now, I suppose you will find it hard to believe me, for this is a strange world. But all unbeknown to Jack and Queenie, the respective ex-husband and wife of their youth later became exceedingly pious, and through one of those cross-currents that toss us frail mortals here and there, their paths had met, and they had actually married! Before Jack went on the stage he had been plain John Grant. It was not until he became an actor that he took the name of Fordish.

Like all hotels of any size, the Splendide, in spite of its care in the selection of guests, sometimes took in undesirable people. Room clerks get to be most knowing citizens: they can tell at a glance, generally, our standing and status in the world. Appearances are sometimes deceptive, it is true, and even room clerks are human. Mistakes will happen.

Who could have foreseen, for instance, that the black-garbed, quiet couple who appeared one day, right after Old Silver's accident, and asked for a room would prove objectionable patrons? Obviously they were religious folk. No longer young—indeed, they were quite old—they bore

the stamp of dignity and refinement. An almost Quaker shyness pervaded them, and they spoke in soft voices, with downcast eyes. They were instantly put into Room 933, which chanced to be vacant. The little blue cards were made out, and two more people in the vast honeycomb of New York lost their identity and became mere numbers to the clerks.

Their simple luggage followed them to their room, and in their solemn black garb they walked to the elevator and were scanned by Pete, the Cerberus who judged everybody. Even Pete liked their quiet demeanour. They would help to keep the tone of the Splendide, though personally he preferred a more exciting type of guest —like the drummer, for instance.

On the third evening of his convalescence, Old 931 was alone and dozing gently, as the aged have a way of doing, even when they are in perfect health. His dreams were the pleasantest; but soon he was conscious of a curious kind of chanting—or was this part of his dream? Gradually he awoke fully. The chanting kept on. It was real, then. He traced the sound to the left wall of his box of a place.

Now, he had sometimes been disturbed by various drills, as all of us have who live in a great city. No help for that kind of noise,

more's the pity. In a town of monstrous sky-scrapers, who can escape the penalty of furious sounds? Motor-horns, milk-wagons, fire-engines, ambulance gongs—these are all a part of that mighty conglomeration which never seems to cease in wild Manhattan. And often Old Silver had to put up with people typewriting into the small hours. He had been kept awake by gentlemen with flasks, and he had once been aroused by an elderly man who whined drunkenly, urging his spouse to let him into their room. "Be yourself!" he had plaintively urged in a husky sort of whisper. "Oh, Alice, be yourself!" But the mysterious wife had proved adamant, and for long minutes the pleas of her erring husband had been lost upon her. Finally this raucous fellow had fallen with a mighty crash, and afterwards Silver heard from the timid night elevator-man that he had crept into the the lift and slept upon the floor of the car for several hours.

But there was a new kind of nuisance—hymns were being sung. This wasn't a church or a Sunday School—this was the Splendide, supposed to be a homelike, quiet hotel, away from the beaten route of noisy out-of-town Elks who came to New York to have a good time, as they called it. Hymns! Old Silver hadn't heard them for

a long time, save as he passed the Salvation Army on a windy corner now and then.

"The Church's one foundation"

came to him plainly on this particular evening after dinner. And then, more loudly, more authoritatively,

"I need Thee, oh, I need Thee,
Every hour I need Thee!"

until Poor Old 931 was sure he did not need them! He must telephone to the office and have this singing stopped. He couldn't stand it. It got on his nerves. It made him feel ill and close to the grave—as though his own funeral were taking place and this was some mysterious choir chanting the last requiem for his poor soul.

But Old Silver couldn't bring himself to stop the singing. It seemed to mean so much to the unseen singers. Early the next morning, however, he was roused from sleep by invocations to the new day, such as

"Awake, my Soul,"

sung with new gusto and fervour. And that night he heard, with strange appropriateness:

"Now the day is over,
Night is drawing nigh;
Shadows of the evening
Steal across the sky,"

uttered so softly that he had not the heart to tap upon the wall, as he had planned to do. To his horror, an accordion was added to the din; and half the time it was off the pitch, and he thought that the Splendide had become an East Side tenement; and he half expected, if he looked from his window, to see sad laundry hanging on a line—" the short and simple flannels of the poor," as a wit had put it years ago.

The most irritating part of the intoning was that, instead of making Old 931 feel as pious as the singers, he was made conscious of his innate human wickedness! No spiritual cure was effected; on the contrary, he became aware that he was a sinner, and he did not relish the sensation. He remembered his youthful Sunday School; how a pious mother had taught him the shorter catechism; how he had learned the Golden Rule and struggled to observe it.

" Oh, why will they not stop?" thought Silver. And his recumbent soliloquy now resembled that he used so many years ago in a production of " Hamlet " in England. He was the stage-manager then for a provincial and dire Hamlet, and the lights failed to come up when Hamlet's kingly stepfather required them in the player scene. Old Silver's language then was most picturesque for such a mild and kindly-

looking man. He had given vent to that righteous wrath which all of us who are human beings sometimes indulge in. He felt equally wrathful now. He soliloquized at length. He tried hard to hold in. He could do so no longer. He *must* tap on that wall, or summon the desk clerk. But he didn't. The songs fascinated him instead. He deplored his own weakness.

But when he went out to take the lift, he ventured to remark to the club-footed lady at the desk on his floor, "Can't they be moved from 933? I can't stand that singing. Do you hear it 'way out here?"

She only laughed that gentle laugh of hers and promised that she would speak to them.

Old Silver encountered the couple in the elevator that afternoon. They gave him scowls through the mirror, and under their breath he heard them remark on the selfishness and ungodliness of politicians. *He* mistaken for a politician! That was a little too much. Only one thing could have been worse, and that was to be considered a Federal officer sent about to discover errant bootleggers!

In despair, Silver spoke to the chambermaid, Jennie, who tidied up his room. She answered in her broken American (one couldn't call it English!) that as far as she could make out they

was some kinds of missionaries on their way out West, God help 'em.

"Sure," she added, "they might've begun their missionary work right here, an' given that decent little bell-boy a decent tip when he fetched their ice-water—*ice-water*, mind yez!—to them every mornin' and evenin'. Instead, they said, 'God bless you, sonnie,' an' let it go at that! Missionaries! I thought charity began at home, sir!" And she turned away in disgust. "I wonder what I'll be gettin' from such poor trash! A smile like a codfish, I'll warrant!"

No wonder she liked big, generous-hearted drummers and such—yes, and even actors out of a job. They at least had the milk of human kindness in them, God bless 'em!

That night Old Silver tried rapping gently on the wall when the evening hymns began. But a burst of psalms was their reply. And when these were fittingly intoned they must have retired with a clear conscience; and soon the raucous sound of snores greeted poor Old 931—snores that fairly shook the walls and ceilings.

Queenie Fordish came to see Old Silver the next morning. "Only just a minute, please, Oliver," she had pleaded at his door; for he had cried out that he was in the act of buttoning a refractory collar.

When finally he allowed her in, she handed him the gift she always brought—a bottle of home-brew, "to make his old blood warmer," and then frightened him not a little by turning suddenly pale. Even her lips went white.

"Oliver!" she said, when she could speak at all. "Oliver! I've had the most terrible experience! Let me sit down. Oh, it is awful, and I don't know what I shall do!"

All her histrionic ability came back. Yet she was not acting. He saw at once that she was in deadly earnest.

"Nothing's happened to Jack, I hope?" was what Old Silver said; for he could think of only one thing to cause Queenie such alarm.

"No, thank God. But I'm that upset. Wait a minute."

Silver was frightened now. What if she should faint, here in his room? There would be a scandal. Even at their age, they couldn't afford to . . . oh, this was too much!

"Good Lord! what *is* the matter, Queenie?" he gasped. "Have you seen a ghost?"

"No," she managed to get out at last. "Much worse—I've seen—my first husband!"

"Your first *what*?" fairly screamed the old boy.

And then it was, when poor Queenie regained control of herself, that she poured out, in one

wild torrent of words, the terrible tale of her life-long deceit.

She had come up to the city, early, as she had some shopping to do, and she wanted to see how he was in his convalescence, and was walking along the corridor—she was so well known to the clerks that she was never announced—when she had caught a glimpse of that horrid reminder of the past.

"I'd have known him anywhere—even after all these years," she cried out. "And he looked like an old devil, too, really he did!"

"He *is*!" said Old 931 fervently, the remembrance of "Awake, My Soul," to accordion accompaniment, ringing in his tired ears.

"How do *you* know?" asked Queenie.

And now it was Silver's turn to tell of his experiences with the couple next door during the past few days and nights.

"To think that that old missionary was once married to you, Queenie!" Oliver gasped. "Why, it's the only good and sensible thing he ever did! And . . ."

"But he wasn't a missionary when I married him!" Queenie answered, as though she were shocked that he should imagine she would be capable of marrying such a one. "He was something else—oh, yes indeed—a barrister, who

helped no one but himself. I never told Jack—I wouldn't have dared. It's been awful, keeping this secret all these years; but what was I to do? Now that I've told you, maybe I won't be so nervous and jumpy. Don't these psycho-analysts say something like that? Get rid of our inhibitions, and we're all right from then on! Oh, oh, I feel so relieved, already—honestly I do, Oliver." And the pallor actually left her face, and the rosy-apple look came back, much to the other's joy.

Oliver's surprise at Queenie's astonishing story could not be measured. He was flabbergasted; and he looked at her now with a new interest. To think that this gentle, dear soul had kept this guilty secret locked up in her bosom all these years! And Jack was never to know of it—never. She made that stipulation when she rattled off the old tale that the years could not make her forget. "It would kill him," she said. "Keep my secret. But then—how awful for you and me to have something to conceal from Jack! He was coming over to-day with me, but by great good luck a manager sent for him, and he could not get in until this afternoon to keep the appointment. If he'd been with me, I'm sure I'd have given myself away. I'd have fainted, then. I know I should."

"Did — did the missionary know you, Queenie?"

"He didn't even see me, so engrossed was he with his present wife. He seemed devotion itself."

"He knows a lot about devotion," Oliver mused aloud, thinking of the hymns and psalms. "But," he added, "you'll never need to see him again. No doubt he'll be leaving to help the poor heathen in some distant islands soon. So cheer up, Queenie. Just think what it will mean to them, to be converted by this couple!"

Then they both laughed.

"You must have done something awful to him in the old days to cause him to turn to hymn-singing," Oliver went on, to tease her. "Oh, Queenie, fie on you!"

She blushed.

"Not half what he did to me," Queenie countered. "But instead of going in for religion, I went in for Jack. He's the only religion I know, bless him!"

When they went down in the lift, Queenie was happy and care-free again. She was one of those utterly feminine women who feel safe when a man is with them, and only then. Oliver was like an armour about her plump little form. She was safe from missionary attack.

Oliver was handed a letter by the desk clerk. He saw at once that it bore a manager's name.

"Bless my stars!" he gasped, as he read it. "It's from Mortimer."

"Mortimer?" said Queenie. "That's the very man who sent for Jack. He's putting on a revival of 'She Stoops,' and Jack is to do Diggory. They may want me for Mrs. Hardcastle. Think of that!"

Oliver was getting out his reading glasses for his dim eyes. He put them on, hurriedly and in great excitement.

"Gracious! He wants me for old Hardcastle—your husband, my dear, in the play! I've got an engagement at last! And to think that we'll all three be together."

They could have danced a jig right there in the corridor of the Splendide.

"I must tell Barrow at once," Oliver said, thinking first of his good friend. "Speaking of missionaries, he's been the best one I know anything of, Queenie!"

The desk clerk overheard him.

"And speaking of missionaries, those in the room next to you, Mr. Silver—they're leaving this afternoon. There's been a heavy lot of complaints from 935, and all along your hall. No one seemed able to stand their noise. Funny

you didn't complain, sir. You must be a patient man."

And Oliver accepted the compliment. He winked at Queenie, and she squeezed his hand. Jack wouldn't have minded—she knew that. Dear old Oliver! He was just like a brother to them.

The desk clerk wondered at the look of delight on their old faces. And he was glad that Old 931 was well again. Too bad to be laid up, in weather like this. And you never knew, when a man got to his age, what would happen. The thought of the Splendide without Oliver Silver was like the thought of a cherry without a cocktail around it.