CHAPTER XIV

THE ACTRESS

ON the few occasions when Old Silver met her in the elevator, he did not like her. And he felt rather ashamed of himself; for he adored little Lillie, her child. Perhaps he instinctively felt that Lillie was rather neglected. Perhaps he felt that Miss Clavendish was "fast," with her obviously bleached hair and heavily darkened eyelashes and exquisite clothes. Yet she always deported herself like a lady. The Splendide wouldn't have tolerated her otherwise. An actress? Yes; but then he was an actor, and Barrow adored people of "the profession." It was well known that they were given special rates.

She always looked a little bored. As if life had finished with her; and yet it had just begun; for she was not yet thirty, and still beautiful in a rather hard, cold way. And she was in a success—*such* a success! The play had begun rather badly, and had been condemned by the

critics; yet within a few weeks the great public began to take a fancy to it; and now it had been going two years! Two years! Would it never end its phenomenal run? And ye gods it was a play of which Elise Clavendish was ashamed; yet down in her heart of hearts she was grateful for the part, for like the rest of them she had known her bad times. Now, playing to capacity every night, she was able to lay aside a big slice of her salary. The thought was comforting. If she couldn't have cake, she could have bread. And there was little Lillie.

Little Lillie was her problem. Should actresses marry and have children? Reporters were for ever asking her that question—reporters from the avid Sunday papers, looking for a sensational answer to a bromidic query. If she were called upon to choose between a family and a "career" which would it be? Of course she always dissembled. Motherhood was the greatest thing in the world, she said. That was good box-office stuff. After such a statement in print by the well-known Elise Clavendish, there would be a special "Mothers' Matinee" at reduced rates, and all the suburban ladies with families would flock to see the actress who depicted a mother so well because she really *was* one. And Elise would respond to the thundering applause, feeling mentally

dishonest; for she knew she was pandering to her public, and little Lillie was a negligible factor in her busy life. Still, it had to be done. Or so the management told her; and she eased her conscience with sweet sophistries.

Like a great many people in this mixed-up world, Elise Clavendish was misunderstood. An actress? Then, of course, she loved Bohemia, and the road, and tawdry men who wore too many diamonds, and perhaps drinking and smoking. As a matter of fact, she loved a fireside and slippers, and good books and flowers and soft candlelight. But strangely enough, she did not really love Lillie. She would educate her, bring her up to the best of her poor ability, show her the right road to go, and hope for the best for the child. She was an obstruction on the path of life; and there were moments when she hated herself for the way she felt. Why had she married Warren George? For a home, she supposed. She thought that matrimony would bring her a hearth instead of the same old hotel radiator. It didn't. And in the bargain, it brought her a great deal of unhappiness.

She had met him in a company that had gone on tour. She saw at once that he was different from the usual run of actors. He was of an old New England family—Groton, Harvard, the

Racquet Club in New York. He had taken to the stage because he felt an urge for it ever since he was a lad at school, when the amateur shows he was in gave him the longed-for opportunity to reveal whatever histrionic ability he had. He was handsome, well set-up, and quick to adapt himself to any environment. He loathed so-called society—particularly the stiff Boston group who clung together like worms in a tin. A jumble of falseness, he called it; and smiled. None of that for him. Life was too restricted in any such set, too unreal and stilted. He must get out into the big world. When his family heard of his desire to become a professional actor, they were horrified. A George on the stage? It couldn't be. He would lose caste—whatever that was, Warren thought.

When Elise and Warren met, it was in a play in which he had a subordinate rôle. He merely "walked on." But he walked so well, as one of the critics in a small city said, that that notice was the means of his getting a little higher in the scale. His progress was rapid thereafter; for he had a genuine talent. He was not so much a society man who had gone on the stage as an actor who happened to be in and of society. And still his family remained cold.

One night, after the New York run had begun

(it was early September, and Elise often walked the short distance from the theatre to her hotel), she was standing in the centre of Fifth Avenue, waiting for the red signal in the tower, when she heard a quiet "Good evening, madam," and turned to note the handsome face of Warren George.

Now, save at rehearsals, he had never even ventured to address her; for she was a power behind the scenes, as most stars are, and it was understood that no minor member of the company should speak to her unless, like royalty, she began the conversation. Therefore, she was much surprised when she heard his voice and recognized him.

To herself she said, "I don't mind—how foolish of me to care," and let it go at that. She found herself walking across the street with him, up to the very door of her hotel; and she had to confess that she found his society anything but dull. She liked him so much, indeed, that as he was about to depart she asked him to sup with her in her tiny sitting-room, and they talked into the far, small hours.

That was the beginning. The others in the company noted the growing intimacy, and predicted that something would come of it. They knew that Warren George was different, and

from a distinguished family; and they were aware of his great talent.

Well, Elise married him. She could have done far worse, the gossips said.

At first they were supremely happy. Then, with Warren's success, which she had so much desired, came the rift within the lute. Managers sent for him rather than for her. There was talk of his being featured in the play along with her; talk again of his being given a vehicle of his own. Always Warren now, and little of Elise.

She knew she was being submerged. She knew, too, in her heart (for she was nobody's fool) that he had more talent in his little finger than she had in her whole body; and she grew afraid, and jealous, and embittered. So soon!

He seems to become better looking every day. Success has a way of making people handsomer. The joy within them comes to the surface. The glow in the heart becomes the shine in the eyes.

And with his artistic success, came also success with women. She saw how they looked at him. They forgot that he was married—if they knew it at all, or cared. And a baby was on the way! She prayed that it might not be born.

She even began to think that Warren wanted her to become a mother so that she would be

absent from the stage. She brooded over this. It became an obsession with her, as such thoughts do when a woman is in her delicate condition.

Little Lillie was born; and poor Elise (for we must really call her that now) hoped that things would change. They merely became worse. Too ill to return to the stage for several months, she was to sit back and watch Warren climb to as high a position as she had ever occupied; but now she was proud of his success, since it brought them creature comforts. It was not unpleasant to sit back—she who had worked so hard all her life—and receive instead of give.

But she did not receive the love that she had at first. There came ugly whispers of other women in Warren's life—there is always some kind "friend" to reveal the unsavoury truth. And while New York was ringing with praises of Warren, she was feeling the shame a good wife knows when her husband is not all he should be. She thought of the glowing life on Broadway—ah! she knew it well. She thought of that string of lights, like a necklace hung on the city's throat each evening, when, decked and gleaming, the sprawling metropolis gave herself up to pleasure. And always she thought of Warren. Warren down there in the midst of it. Warren's handsome face beguiling a thousand women admirers.

Warren in the ascendant, she a mere back-drop now.

Was she growing cynical? She feared that. She fought against it. When she saw his name in the papers she genuinely rejoiced; but she loathed the thought of his name signed to letters to other women—she was certain that it was. She wilted and grew thin under the strain. Yes, she was "poor Elise," indeed, now.

And then—a strange thing happened. Two years of this had gone by, when Warren was killed. He had been standing ready to go on in his wonderful part, when a counter-weight fell and crushed the life out of him. Was it the work of the old pagan gods? Elise wondered.

Telegrams and letters poured in upon her. How weary she grew of opening them all! For love had been brief, and now it was beyond the hope of redemption. He was gone. Everything was gone out of her life, and it is no wonder that she became an embittered woman. For they all said (the world is fond of saying it) that she was not the same artist she had been in the old days. A spark had gone out of her. She never seemed able to recapture it.

But the worst was to come. Long afterwards, when she could bear to do it, she went through his papers; and found a diary—a

sporadic setting down of main incidents in his life. And he had written of his unhappy days with her—how "the utter lack of sympathy and understanding had crushed him," and much more than that.

Her pride was hurt, never to be regained, like the spark of her brilliant early twenties. The women—they mattered not half so much as her own failure with him. And the child, being a part of him, she could scarcely tolerate for a long while. A door seemed to slam in her face. With the finality of Fate. And she found herself in a sealed room, from which there was no exit.

This was her story. Of course Old Silver did not know it. No one knew it. He did not know of the struggle to regain her poise and position in a world which had treated her cruelly.

She went in for big emotional parts—and finally she succeeded in getting back her public. But it was a long, hard pull, up-hill all the way. That sad look in her eyes—she tried to conceal it with make-up, even off the stage. It only accentuated the smouldering ashes of unrest which dimly burned there. But people said, "Suffering has chastened her. It may make a genius of her yet."

She decided to live quietly. No more men for her! They were all of a piece—deceitful

creatures who battened on the door of a woman's heart, gained entrance, and then fled when a prettier face came along.

She buried herself in her work. This play that she was now in—it gained momentum instead of losing it. Perhaps she could save enough to live in comfort for the rest of her days, quietly, somewhere in the country. With little Lillie, of course. And enough servants. All she wanted was a garden, and a few chickens, and a Ford to get to the station on the few occasions when she might wish to go to the city. Such simple needs!

She took rooms at the Splendide because it was a desirable hotel for her. Her neglect of Lillie had been noticed by the old ladies in the lobby, who rather shunned her, not only on that account but because she looked "flashy." Mascara and virtue—surely these could not go together, they said in shocked surprise. Yet they could see nothing wrong in her. She was just of another world. Perhaps the fact that she paid no attention to anyone rather got on their nerves. No one could say that she attempted to "get acquainted." She seemed quite content to be alone. Yet there was a curious legend about the hotel that she was a wrong 'un.

One evening, as she was about to leave for

the theatre, she was seen to rush into the corridor on her floor.

"Mrs. Pleydell, come quickly!" she called to the floor clerk, who had so little to do that she was glad of any signs of excitement.

"Why, what is it, Miss Clavendish?"

"Little—little Lillie is very sick. Get a doctor. Oh, oh!"

Old Mrs. Pleydell leaped from her place and rushed to the rooms. One look, and she knew that the child on the bed was in a very serious condition. She grabbed the telephone and called for the hotel physician. "Come at once," she said. Then she rushed for her own hot-water bag. One must always get a hot-water bag in an emergency.

Little Lillie had been taken suddenly ill right after her simple dinner upstairs. She always dined early with her mother, of course, and was then put to bed while Elise went to the theatre.

Have you ever felt alone in a crowded place? While Elise waited for the doctor she had never been so completely by herself. She knew that every room in the big hotel was occupied; but she knew practically no one in all the building. A nod here, a "good evening" there—that was the sum of her acquaintance. She was conscious of elevators moving up and down, out

there in the halls. People were going to dinner and later, perhaps, to the theatre, and they knew nothing of her trouble, as she sat there in the room with her child. Oh, it was terrible. What if the pale little one on the bed should die, like this, with only herself beside her?

She tried to think rapidly what she could do. Nothing; she was helpless. High-strung, tense, she was a failure in an emergency. Mrs. Pleydell had rushed away, she knew not where. Why didn't the doctor come? Hours seemed to drag by. Yet only a few moments had elapsed. She forgot the theatre, she forgot time, she forgot everything except the appalling fact that her little Lillie was lying there, white and still.

The physician came. He looked grave. He wore spectacles, and carried a tiny bag which he opened, revealing innumerable little bottles and instruments.

He leaned over Lillie, listening to her heart-beats. He nodded. Elise knew that the case was serious. She gasped. She almost fainted. Mrs. Pleydell was behind her, with smelling-salts.

"Take these," she said.

Elise, in a daze, did as she was bidden. She would have done anything she was told to do. She was an automaton. Her vivid personality was swept away into nothing.

"Will she get well?" she heard a voice saying, and realized that it was her own, with all its golden tones gone—gone.

"There will be a crisis. If we pass that, all will be well. I cannot tell—yet," was what the doctor said, very low. It was his manner of saying this, not what he said, that scared her utterly.

A crisis! And Lillie had seemed so well only half an hour ago. What malign fate was hanging over them there in that room? Why did this have to be? What had she ever done to deserve this?

She should have been at the theatre by now. She must ring up Meyer and tell him she could not play to-night.

"Get the box-office, please, please, Mrs. Pleydell."

"But you must go—— At this hour——"

"Get the box-office!" Elise almost shouted in the sitting-room. The child must not be disturbed. She had moved into the other room.

"Meyer? This is Miss Clavendish. My child is desperately ill. I cannot play this evening."

A pause. The sound of a whirr at the other end of the line. No word of sympathy for her.

Only a demand that she should come down, no matter what was happening.

"Impossible!" Elise said.

"But we're sold out, as usual!" Meyer cried, distracted, through the instrument. "There's a long line of standees in the lobby now!"

"Damn you!" cried the actress. "Damn you!" And she smashed the receiver on its hook.

When she looked up, Oliver Silver was at her side.

"What can I do for you?" was his first question.

She knew him by sight, of course. But if he had never liked her, she had never liked him.

"Why do you come here now, intruding upon me?" she cried out.

Old 931 looked at her pityingly.

"I have just heard—little Lillie. This is awful. Let me be of service." He put out his hands.

"No. Every one has been so unkind to me here," she told him. "I wish to be alone. I sent you daffodils when your room was being done over, and you never even asked who had sent them. I don't need you now!"

Silver was nonplussed.

"You—it was you who sent me those daffodils

—so long ago?" he cried. "Forgive me—I never knew."

"You never wanted to know. You're like all the rest of them in this damnable city," she said, hysterically. She beat her hands together. "Leave me."

"I will go to Meyer myself and explain," he said, very quietly. There was a tear in his eye. Then she was *not* hard, she was *not* made of marble out of the theatre. "I thought——"

"I don't care what you thought!" cried Elise Clavendish. And disdain was in every word. What an artist she was, when it came to sarcasm!

He went out. He went straight to the theatre. He found Meyer wringing his hands.

"A two years' run ruined, because of a sentimental woman!" he said.

Silver could have choked him, there in the lobby.

"Is a mother's anguish nothing to you?" he asked. "*You* who have been responsible for these Mothers' Matinées, you silly little man?" And he went away, leaving the manager to his selfishness and greed.

The way of the world, he thought.

When he got back to the Splendide, little Lillie was better. But the doctor was still there. He would not leave. The case was far too

serious. "I must watch all night," he announced.

And with Elise now were some of those old silver-haired ladies who had scarcely ever spoken to her before. The actress was too stricken to send them away. And Pete, in the lift, wanted to know how the child was; and Erdleigh, and Barrow; and the desk clerk, forgetting for once his little blue cards which he was for ever arranging in such proper rows; and Annie, at the theatre ticket stand—she was anxious; and the head waiter. All of them clustered about, wishing to get bulletins from that room.

"Am I never to play with her again?" Pete asked, with a lump in his throat. He forgot to be theatrical. He was not acting a part now.

Scarlet fever was the red word that trailed down the corridors. That meant quarantine for little Lillie. Too ill to be moved to a hospital, she must remain in the hotel shut off from every one. A man from the Health Department came and placed a dreadful-looking card upon the door of the suite. Yet no one was afraid. They all stood by.

The crisis passed. But Elise could not play. There was a great deal of publicity. The "mother actress" was giving every moment to her child, the public prints stated. Gorgeous

advertising, utilized by Meyer for his own ends. Since his theatre had to close, he would make something of the tragic fact.

The child's room was filled with flowers. When she was able to take nourishment, the cook sent up dainty broths, delicate dishes concocted with love. Little Lillie had often been to his kitchen, pottering about, as a child will; and he had often given her little cakes, various dainties. He loved her. For did he not have a child of his own?

And Old Silver, looking old for the first time, with tired eyes, wondering what he could do next for the child.

The whole force of the hotel wondering, wishing to be of service. The Splendide was no longer a marble building, but a great beating heart. Beating in sympathy for a little girl who was ill unto death.

The shadows deepened about Elise's eyes. The mascara was forgotten. There was a glimpse of the woman's soul, for all to see.

"I am sorry for what I said to you that first terrible night," she told Old Silver. "I did not know."

"Nor I. See, we have all got together over little Lillie. Did you realize how we loved her?" They were alone on the mezzanine floor.

"I have been wicked, in my neglect of the child," the poor actress told him. "If only she will get well!"

"If all this does not cure her, nothing will," Old 931 said to her.

And it was true. The warmth got into that shut and barred room. Nurses moved on noiseless feet. People whispered all through the corridor of that floor. They tiptoed. They placed fingers to lips. Even the policeman down in the street warned motorists not to blow their horns when they passed the Splendide. There was a knitting together of a hundred lives. People spoke to one another who had not spoken before. The love in the city, which had been like a rose trodden under millions of hurrying feet, was resurrected. It blossomed again. It had never died.

And little Lillie did not die. That flower of affection brought her back to them.

Out of the actress's sorrow came a strange peace. A belief once more in human beings.

"I can go on now," she said to Old Silver. "This is wonderful. I did not know." And she wept. She had wept so many times during these hideous days and nights that it seemed as if there could be no more tears for her to shed.

"When she is well, I shall take her to the

country. I must get away with the child. I shall give her everything I have now, of affection and real mother love."

And then Silver told her of his dear friends down on Long Island. Jack and Queenie Fordish—they would take her in. Her own kind. No child of their own, ever. Now what a chance for them! He would arrange it all.

Elise smiled sadly at him. "I have seen them. I knew who they were, whenever they came to see you. Oh, would they do it?" she wanted to know. She could not believe that all this sweetness was in the world of agate and stone—the only world she had ever known.

Queenie grand-mothered the child. She brought her jellies. She fixed the time, when the doctor said she could be safely moved. She purred. Jack purred. Their cat purred, down in the sunlit cottage in the country, the morning little Lillie was brought down, pale after her illness, white as a narcissus.

"We will make her plump again," Queenie said.

And by June the roses came to the garden and to little Lillie's cheeks.

"But Autumn will come," Elise said. "What am I to do then?"

For Meyer had never forgiven her. He could

not understand. A theatre closed for the sickness of a child!

"There is Mortimer," Old Silver told her. "There is this revival of 'She Stoops.' He will take you on. We will all be together."

It was too good to be true. But it was. Life has a mysterious way of playing with the puppets that are part of the Great Show. The strings were dangled by an Unseen Hand.