

CHAPTER XV

CHARLES TELLS HIS STORY

WHEN he had quite recovered from his accident, Old Silver began to take stock of himself. The rest had done him good—of that there was no doubt; and now he was in condition to get ready for the rehearsals of “*She Stoops*.”

Only an actor who has been out of employment for a long time—“at liberty,” as the phrase runs in the theatre—can know his joy at once again getting into harness. To slip on the paraphernalia of the profession, step through a dingy stage door—the dingier the better—and meet for the first time the fellow members of a company which is to bring to life a lifeless manuscript—there is nothing quite so exhilarating. There is a sense of impending importance. Oliver Goldsmith, lying in his grave there in the Temple, in distant London, where the busy world of men whirls by, knows, perhaps, of the revival of his laughing lines, and turns and sleeps

the better for the knowledge. How many years ago he penned those happy words, which are to trip anew from the tongues of men and women born, generations after him!

Silver thought of this. Often, in the old days, he had paused in his walk down Fleet Street and the Strand, and crept into that sheltered place where Goldsmith sleeps, and paid his little silent tribute to the poet-dramatist. Now he was to say again the lines he loved; and for Goldsmith's sake he would say them well.

He became engrossed in the rehearsals. But not until he had seen Charles, the doorman, after *his* recovery.

It so happened that he encountered him one morning, on his way to the theatre. He was escorting Miss Clavendish to the shabby old play-house where they were to speak their parts; and he knew that Queenie and Jack would come in from the country, leaving little Lillie with the old Scottish maid and the purring cat, and that the whole world would be a song for them all. Life looked rosy and sweet to him. To be working again, when his funds were so low—ah! there was nothing like it—nothing.

“Good morning, sir,” he heard the voice of Charles. “Taxi, sir?”

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"No ; we'll walk, thank you, Charles. I hope you're better."

"Indeed I am, sir. But I'd like to have that talk with you, when you're at leisure. If I'm not presuming, sir——"

"As if you could ever presume !" answered Old 931. He felt at peace with every one. "How about to-night, up by the Park, as we planned so long ago ? I always like my evening walk this pleasant weather, after I'm tied up at the theatre all day."

"Very good, sir." And Charles touched his cap. "Thank you, Mr. Silver. And a happy revival to you both !"

For of course he had heard of Silver's engagement ; and he, like Erdleigh and all the rest of them within the Splendide, rejoiced at the old fellow's success, which promised so much. They were like one huge family.

That night, after a hectic day in the theatre, he strolled up the Avenue toward the green loveliness of the Park. The lights were twinkling, "like moonstones hanging from a fair queen's ears," he thought. A light rain in the afternoon had washed the city's face until it sparkled and shone ; and taxis whirled by him, filled with happy lovers, no doubt. Old 931 could have danced and skipped up the broad

street, as that "companion of a mile" had danced through merrie England so long ago in the Alfred Noyes ballad which he loved.

Charles was on hand. In the dim light he looked better than he had under the sprawling electric umbrella of the Splendide. The enforced rest which *he* had taken had likewise done him good, and he walked with a sprightlier step. Yet there was a sadness in his eyes—the sadness of a veteran of the World War, who remembers the horrors of the conflict, and can never forget.

"Well, it's good to see you, Charles, alone like this," Old 931 greeted him. "You're always so busy down-town; and now *I'm* busy, thank heaven!"

"And delighted we all are, sir."

They had walked, naturally enough, into the Park. It was pleasant to hear Charles' words. To be loved by the whole force at the Splendide—well, that was good. It made life all the sweeter.

"Thanks. But Charles, there's something on your mind. I've known there was, for days, but I've been so busy with these rehearsals, and learning my lines—not so easy as it was twenty years ago!—that I didn't have time to speak to you. I know something of your history—how

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you were in the Rifle Brigade, same regiment as the Duke of Connaught; how you got to be Sergeant, and got wounded in the first advance of the Somme. Oh, your bravery is well known to us all, Charles, and we're mighty proud of you."

Charles was silent. Then "I'd forgotten all that, sir, in the light of what's happened since. You know, I have a daughter, somewhere. But can I tell you my little story from the beginning? It won't take long."

"Do," said Old Silver; and he took his arm as they strolled along.

"Well, sir," began Charles, "I lived in a little house down Seddlescombe way, in Sussex, when I was a lad. My father was a small farmer. After I'd been in the army about five years I married a dear little wife—as sweet a girl as you'd have wished to see—and we was that happy! A little blue-eyed girl was born to us. We brought her up very carefully and well. My wife had been a cook before we got married, and a nursemaid before that, so she understood how to make our little place comfortable, as you may well imagine, sir.

"When I got back home, wounded—you've often noticed my crippled left hand, though I always try to hide it, sir—I found the wife all

to bits, mostly through anxiety about me; and our little girl Emmie—she was then about thirteen years old—was doing most of everything for her. Regular little mother she was, sir! My missus was having her brought up well and regular, and far above most other children of our class, and my wife's old missus, who lived down in Sloane Street, even let her come to classes at her own house with her own little daughter. We were that proud of her, for she was gettin' an education—something we never had. You can understand, sir, how we felt. Then my poor Millie died, just as I got out of hospital the last time—and what was I to do about Emmie? My sister came forward and helped. She was wardrobe mistress at the Folly Theatre. She never let my daughter go near the place though, as she was always so afraid she'd want to go on the stage. (Funny how actors and actresses and people connected with the theatre never wants others to do as they've done! I can't understand it, sir.) Well, we put Emmie at a good school just out of London, and she 'finished off' beautifully, I can tell you.

“I left the army in 1922, and Emmie was growing into a fine girl, as pretty as a picture, too. I got a job as commissionaire at Harrod's Stores, and worked there for over a year. Then I got

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a chance to come out here with an old officer friend of mine as a valet. When he went home, I stayed on and got this little job a little later at the Splendide. No use goin' back to dear old England, with the mess things was in there. You understand, sir."

"Indeed, yes," nodded Old Silver, thinking of the havoc of the war.

"Well, I always sent money for the kid's schooling, and my sister always wrote to me regularly about her—told me what a fine young girl she'd got to be. She'd learned French, and she was crazy to get to Paris—anyhow. I guess she did sneak over there one vacation time, and we heard she earned her way by workin' there for a while after she left school. But we never knew. Emmie was the kind who was born to do what she wanted to do. And here was I, way out here, and though her aunt was good to her, they wasn't suited to each other, I guess. He paused. "Queer world," he ruminated aloud. "The more you try to fix people's lives for 'em, to make 'em happier, the more determined they seem to be to change your plans. Paris? Emmie didn't belong in a city like that. Yet she determined to go. Humph—she must be twenty-one by now. One day about six months ago, I got a letter from my sister, saying

that Emmie's letters from Paris had stopped long since. My sister's a simple soul—was, rather, for she died last month. She never sent me any address where I could reach Emmie, in Paris. I got to feelin' mighty lonesome, and I guess it was that about as much as the weather that made me get sick. It's an awful feelin' in a big city like this, sir. Maybe you know it."

"I do, sometimes," Silver said.

"The strangest part of my story is now to come," Charles paused in the path to say dramatically.

"What? There's a sequel?" the old actor wanted to know.

"Listen: The other night I was walkin' home, and I got stopped by the traffic somewhere round-about Forty-sixth Street and Six Avenue. A cab whizzed by, and I looked into it. Now, I may be mistaken—but I don't think so—*my daughter was in that cab!*"

Old Silver stood perfectly still, leaning on his stick. His distinguished figure was silhouetted against the darkness, because a lamp shed its light farther up the path.

"Charles!" he cried out. "This can't be true. It's years since you've seen the girl. You must have made a mistake."

"No; I don't think so, sir. You see, the cab

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slowed down, so I got a good look before it rushed on again. And there was one thing about Emmie I could never forget. She had a droop in her left eyelid—see, just like mine, same as I have! Some folks used to say it was a mark of beauty in her—it never was in me! Anyhow, there it was; and if it wasn't my Emmie, I'm done for. Talk about the war and its excitement! That had nothing on this!"

A droop in her left eyelid! Silver couldn't speak for a moment. A wild thought rushed into his brain. But no, it couldn't be possible. And yet. . . . Should he tell Charles what he was thinking? It would be wonderful if this were true; but it would be terrible if it were not. He decided swiftly that it would be far wiser not to say a word. But he must get to Susie Martin to-morrow. Where did she live? He was vague about the address to which he was taken that day, for he was all but unconscious. And he never noticed to what neighbourhood they had removed him. What a stupid old fool he was! Susie wasn't in the telephone book. Yet he knew her theatre. That was it. He'd go there, or write to her. She had an English father. Her left eyelid drooped. She was the very age of the vanished Emmie.

The threads were beginning to piece together

The Actor in Roem 931

in some sort of pattern. Old Silver heard Charles saying :

“ I’m sure, if she came over here, she went on the stage. Now, sir, I hate to trouble you, but’ this is what I was thinkin’ : you bein’ an actor yourself, perhaps you could advise me what to do to find my little girl.”

“ If Susie can be found——”

“ Emmie, sir.”

“ Yes, yes ; of course, Emmie,” stammered Old Silver. “ If Emmie can be found, you may be sure I’ll be the one to help you, Charles. What a strange story you’ve told me ! Now wouldn’t it be great if we could find your child ? And who knows, who knows ? It’s not impossible.”

“ Thank you for your encouragement, sir. I knew you’d be just like this. Always helpin’ others.”

And they turned back to the Avenue with its moonstones and its moth-like taxis hurrying through the darkness.