CHAPTER XVII

THE NIGHT ELEVATOR MAN

THEY all missed Charles around the Splendide. Rumours were rife. The publicity in the papers made Sunday feature stories for weeks. But it was good to know that old Charles had won out at last and was being supported by his clever little daughter, having lost her so many years. True to his word, Munson capitalized the romantic story, and the theatre took on a new lease of life. One could hardly get seats, even at the agencies. Charles was given a small part in the Revue, and received each night almost as much applause as Susie when she made her sensational entrance. The world was theirs.

But Susie's story was not the only one which the Splendide had to unfold: There was the night elevator man.

He came on duty only after daylight had gone.—Peter could have stood the work better than he—Peter, who plied his trade in the far

more interesting hours of the day. Lonely night workers—these are those we should pity in a vast city.

No one knew what became of him in the day time. Perhaps he slept until about four of an afternoon. His was a mysterious existence. They simply called him "Captain." No one ever bothered to discover his last name. Perhaps Old Silver knew.

Now, though the Splendide did a restricted business, as has been said, there were times when, the city being overcrowded with conventions, it was necessary for Barrow to take in a less congenial group of really odd fellows, and often it was the Captain's painful business to escort to their rooms people who had indulged too freely in those liquid refreshments which are so strictly forbidden by a well-meaning government. He was always very kind and thoughtful, too, and never complained when they cursed him for not entirely disrobing them and putting them to bed! The Captain, you see, was instinctively a gentleman, and even though he had descended in the social scale, because he had fallen on evil days, there were some things he could not bring himself to do.

But it was certainly a queer life he led—up

and down, up and down through the long, weary nights. He couldn't have told you how often he made his monotonous trips. It was all a blur of rising and falling continuously, and of seeing strange faces—some of them exceedingly strange. But kindly faces, some of them, and selfish, dissipated faces, too, at times. All the respectable old ladies of the Splendide were safely tucked in their beds, of course, when the poor Captain came on duty. He never had seen one of them. And then there were the weary faces—some weary of pleasure, others of business cares. Often they would make him stand and listen to their troubles in the still watches of the night, when time seemed endless and the big hotel was hushed, like a mausoleum. Tips he used to get in varying amounts—extravagant ones, and mean ones too, and sometimes, as in the case of those missionaries, none at all.

What did it all mean? he used to wonder. Was this the life he had hoped for and dreamed of when he came over to America some twenty-five years ago, full of renewed courage? Ah! his courage had almost gone now, although he would never own the fact to a soul, poor old chap. He was bald and bent, with a bit of a limp, and quite worn out, like an ancient

shoe; but always he was a gentleman—you could see that. And one felt rather ashamed to give him all this trouble when, in the wee small hours, he might be reading about *Captain Cuttle* or *Little Nell*—for he adored his Dickens, which was almost his Bible.

Up and down, down and up! The ups and downs of life! Well, well, it couldn't last for ever, could it? he'd say to himself. And soon he would go down and down, and be dismissed for old age.

What a life for an old sailor—a little box of a place, when what he had loved was the look-out, and far horizons and wide expanses of blue, blowing sea and white sails! Life was a riddle. He'd been a pirate, too—though, God bless him, you would never have guessed it in a thousand years. But Old 931 knew it.

Yes, Old Silver had met him years ago when he was just a boy and was travelling to Australia to act out there, and his ship was detained at Pango-Pango, in Samoa, owing to a tidal wave. The Captain's ship had been driven upon the shore one night just before Silver, with a few of the other passengers, was coming aboard after a night of simple revelry in the native village there. Silver was horrified when he saw the ship he had left lying securely moored

against the little quay now lying up among the trees, terribly broken and damaged, but still a big ship upon parts of which one could finally scramble aboard. Hundreds of people had been killed, of course. He knew that at once. The passengers who had gone ashore for the last few hours on the chance of getting a glimpse of a native village by night were of course untouched by the terrific storm; but only a handful of other passengers and a few of the crew had escaped the awful feeling of being transported into the woods on their ship. People now stood about in dazed, bewildered groups—natives and whites alike amazed at the unusual calamity. Silver thanked God in his heart that he had been among the saved. He wandered from group to group, hearing tales of the strange sight which he had fortunately missed, when he had gone up in the hills, picking weird flowers and watching the amazing birds and insects which he had only read of or seen stuffed in museums. Everywhere on the ground lay dead bodies and wreckage and strange and wonderful fish. Natives were weeping everywhere over the loss of their own boats—all that they had.

Wearied out by his experience, he knew that he must lie down somewhere or other and get

sleep—that was certain. As he was standing there, still stunned by the marvellous events which had befallen him, he began to realize that he was being addressed in his own language by some one he had never set eyes on before. No, this man hadn't been one of the passengers —that was sure. He was a small, spare fellow of about thirty years of age, dressed in a red shirt and dark trousers. He had no boots on his feet—they were quite bare—and he wore a cap of a greenish sort of wool with a peak hanging over his left ear—a strange enough figure.

"Well, sir, this is bad business, isn't it? Can I be of any assistance to you, I wonder? I have a sort of shack near by along the coast, not a mile away; but it's a stiff climb there. However, if you'll come with me I think I can at least assure you of a fairly good night's rest. . . . Yes, I'm English," as he noted the look of inquiry in the other's eyes. "At least, I used to be, though you might not think it. Come along, will you? There'll be no peace here this night, I can tell you."

Silver expressed his thanks and followed his strange but welcome host.

At length they reached the shanty on the hill-side. It consisted of just a thatched roof

with walls of reeds or bamboo strung together, which could evidently be lowered at night and raised in the daytime. The flooring was of little pebbles, cleverly laid, packed close together in some sort of rude cement. A small lamp was burning and cast a flickering light on the strange surroundings. By this lamp Silver could just discern a small figure asleep, with a spelling-book in English by her side. She was almost white, and very dainty, Silver thought.

"My wife," said his host, who had scarcely spoken all the way to the shack. At the sound of his voice the sleeping figure awakened.

Then followed a torrent of questions in the native lingo, with amazed glances at the stranger, who was then, by the way, a most personable young man.

Soon the wife bustled about and prepared some food—coffee, coarse bread and some meat, which they all consumed off crude earthen dishes. Neither the man nor the woman spoke much; but even when they did sputter out some sentences the actor, of course, could not understand them.

At last she cleared away the simple dishes and began to prepare a couch for him of fern and grass, covered with a rough blanket. Then

she went back to her own rather untidy bed, drawing crude curtains about her; but not before she had advanced to Silver and timidly said, "Goo' night," like any baby.

When she had retired, "Yes, sir, my wife," the host explained, "and I love her. Strange, isn't it? but true. I can see you are surprised."

He urged Silver to go and lie down and try to get some rest. He was not loth to do so after his amazing experience. "I'll tell you everything you may wish to know in the morning," was the host's parting speech. "I shall be up and doing several hours before you'll be thinking of getting up," he smiled. "My little ship will be round in the bay here first thing, unless by some quite possible chance she has got lost in the night."

Next morning Silver was awakened by his queer little hostess, who looked exceedingly pretty in the light of day. She was standing close to his couch, and asking him in quaint broken English, aided by several quite understandable signs, if he would care now for a swim while the Captain, as she called her man, was away "lookin' for boat." He followed her down to one of the loveliest pools he had ever seen—the storm had vanished as swiftly

as it had come and the morning was a dripping mass of blue and green and gold. Rather, there were two pools, one warm and the other deliciously cool. His hostess promptly divested herself of every stitch of wearing apparel, as unconcerned in the process as though he had been one of her own sex. The naïveté of it fascinated Silver as he watched her plunge into the depths of the water, like a nymph. Such natural feminine beauty and grace he had never seen. He felt as if she were something deliciously apart from life, yet strangely of it, and in a moment he, too, had divested himself of his clothing and followed her into the pool. She swam toward him, laughter on her lips and in her glowing eyes, and before he could resist her she neatly ducked him, and then swam away rapidly, he giving playful chase. But he soon found that to catch her was out of the question. Finally, she climbed out and quickly put on her cotton dress and, pointing up the path down which they had come, ran like a young deer to the little "homestead" on the hill.

Silver had just taken what he intended to be a final dive when he looked up and found the Captain watching him.

"Well, sir, are you ready for your break-

fast?" he called. "Well done! Come now, sit here and get dry. It'll only take a couple of minutes. Have a cigarette? I always think a cigarette is indispensable just after a swim, don't you?"

It was as though they were all children, innocent, unknowing. The Captain was still very silent about himself and his milieu—merely telling Silver how thankful he was to find his boat coming along out there in the offing, apparently quite unaffected by last night's amazing upheaval of the waters near Pango-Pango.

After breakfast—a strange one for Silver, but not so bad as he might have expected—coco-nut milk and yams and some peculiar sweet fruit, and eggs stewed in pineapple juice—a queer mixture, but try it some day—they all three went down to the cove, and there, moored up against a rock, they found the ship. A small brigantine, she was, and smart in appearance, considering everything—but the crew! Four of the motliest-looking individuals Silver had ever cast eyes upon. Very tough—very tough indeed, but evidently very frightened of the Captain—frightened, but devoted, too.

Ka-lula—Mrs. Captain—sat and talked away

rapidly with the sailors, and her husband took Silver below and there told him this strange tale:

"You think it odd, me being here and gone native. Oh, yes, it does look funny. But my father was a parson down Cornwall way. I was one of two children. We had not much of this world's goods, but sufficient to give us fairly good educations, though. He sent me first of all to a small school at Brighton, and then sent me to Charterhouse, in London. Later on, I went with a scholarship to Dublin University. Father was an Irishman from Galway. From my earliest youth I wanted one thing, and that was to be a pirate—not a sham pirate, but a real downright pirate; and in order to be one effectually I had always been firmly convinced that a good education was sure to be useful. I read and re-read all the accounts of the lives of pirates, and there is nothing of their lore that I didn't get hold of one way or another. At last the time came, at my father's death, when I could leave Dublin and begin to work out my real destiny. He left me about five thousand pounds, and I embarked in a sailing vessel for San Francisco. I worked my passage out there, for I was determined to be very careful with my money, which, by

the way, I carried in cash, or rather in notes, in a packet which never left my neck, to which it was chained. I worked my passage, I say, but not before the mast, only as under-steward. She was a big clipper I was on—one of the finest of her class.

"This was at least forty-five years ago, mind you, and 'Frisco was a real 'Frisco in those days, long, long before the great fire. There I set to work and made friends with some of the captains trading in the South Seas, and at last I made a really true and devoted friend —at least, he was devoted to *me*, through an accident. I saved his life when a fellow in some low dive shot at him, and I put up my arm and took the bullet in it. Anyone would have done it—for what's a wound in the arm compared to a life? Well, after that nothing would content my distinctly shady but fascinating friend but I must go with him on a trading venture to Samoa, or thereabouts. We traded from island to island, and—he made me his second mate. All on board got to know there was no one between me and the Captain. He adored me. He was a good fellow in many ways, but the biggest scoundrel ever left unhanged. But he never lied or drank, and that was a comfort.

"Then began my life of real adventure. I'll tell you a lot later on—no time now. I just want you to get the high-spots. I soon picked up all I wanted to know—you see, I'd been well educated and had studied a good deal about the sea when I was at Dublin. And I was as strong and wiry as I am now.

"Well, to make a long story short, I worked in that ship with my friend for some three years, cruising everlastingly between all the islands in the South Seas, but cruising honestly all the time. It wasn't going to suit me long, though, because all the time I was only just marking time while I learned everything I could about the South Seas, with a view to being a pirate. And I still was canny enough to have my five thousand intact.

"One day, just as I was thinking I'd leave him and go and try to pick up some small suitable vessel, the Captain sent for me and told me he felt he was dying, and that he had left me the ship in his will. He died, will you believe it? the very next day, and I assumed command and carried on as a genuine trader for another two years. I put by another five thousand, and banked the whole when I got to a good port. Then I started out to be a genuine pirate—a picturesque Robin

Hood of the sea. I wanted to rob the rich to help the poor. You see, I hadn't got any bloodthirsty instincts—it was only the picturesque part of a pirate's life that appealed to me.

"Well, what happened was this: the second day out we sighted a small barque of about seven hundred tons on her way to the Marquesas, and seeing she'd been disabled slightly—her mizen-mast all shattered in a gale and her mainsail very badly damaged—we soon caught up to her and, training a small gun on her, we fired and she hove to. I clambered aboard and was met at the rail by a very mild-mannered man, who at once informed me he was a clergyman going out to the Marquesas to visit a sick sister, who was the widow of a missionary. He said there was no money aboard—the only thing they'd got was smallpox! Well, I was over the side in a second and making my first strike as a pirate! Little enough we got—not even a touch of smallpox. But later on I came under the influence of a mate on board my own ship. He was a Jesuit priest in disguise, and all he had wanted was to be put ashore somewhere so that he might preach and do good among the natives. I got taken sick a while after, and it was because I was

ill that he got hold of me and persuaded me out of my mad play-acting folly. I became what I hope I am now—a good Catholic—I resumed my ordinary trading from island to island. Last year I found little Ka-lula—oh, no matter how, or where—and here we are, off and on, but more often cruising about together!"

It was a weird story. Old Silver—or young Silver, as he was then—remained with the reformed pirate king a few days, and then managed to get passage to Sydney; but he kept in touch with him year after year, and in long letters gained knowledge of his troubles and misfortunes. He learned how his ship was lost in a gale, and how he swam ashore, followed closely by Ka-lula; how they bravely started again, only to meet with fresh disaster in a fire aboard their new ship; and how Ka-lula died in the flames, which had gained too great a hold for her to be able to be got out of the Captain's cabin; of his grief and misery at the loss of his devoted little half-caste wife; of how nothing seemed to matter any more; and of how, gradually, he had drifted back to the life on shore and at last to New York.

And there he had looked up Silver, grown

older now, like himself; and one night, in the Splendide, he had rehearsed all his adventures. But he was broke—dead broke. What was he to do? The sea terrified him now. But he had had his dream—he'd been a pirate once, and Peter Pan was his favourite play. He used to go night after night, sitting in the gallery, of course. He got so he could say all the speeches. They took him on, through Silver, for a short time as one of the supernumeraries; but he wasn't an actor, really, and the make-believe behind the scenes got on his nerves. After the reality of his years at sea, how could he understand the pasteboard world in which he finally found himself? It seemed so trifling to him.

"Anything but that," he would say to Silver when he ambled in to talk with him. And then it was that, because he needed the cash, he took the job of night elevator man at the hotel. Getting along in years now and couldn't pick what he wanted to, he told himself. Better than nothing; better than idling down on the wharves. The time might come when he'd ship again—some day, ah! some day. But just now the land looked good to him.

The land! What a mockery! For generally

he was in a little cage, suspended in the air, taking those boring tours to various floors. Up and down, down and up! What a life for an old sailor!